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FAMOUS WESTERN

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An old prophecy started to be fulfilled when Sorrel Gedney and his killers rode into the city of the Dove, determined to kill all the inhabitants who would not submit to peonage.

Featured Novel of Strange Destiny

CITY OF FEAR

by LON WILLIAMS

STEPHEN DEVALE, best known by those who esteemed and loved him as Esteban el Despierto—or Stephen the Vigilant—rode homeward alone to the City of Fear. He had come from north country, specifically from Santa Fe. He had gone there in expectation of good news; he was, instead, a bearer of bad news. Through his solitary journey in wind and sun by day, starlight, moonlight and wind by night, spectral shades of New Mexico's melancholy history haunted him. Ghosts of tragic lives were in every canyon, behind every sun-washed butte, in every dust-devil that spiraled across the desolate land. His young shoulders drooped because of them; they taunted and accused him because he could not prevent the evil that was impending, but could only carry the message of misfortune.

His southward trail led into Valle de Rio Esperanza. But he had left that trail twenty miles from home and ascended onto Mesa del Norte, where his homing horse made a straight journey. Signs of many riders had preceded him all the preceding day. It was urgent that he overtake and pass them, in order to warn of their coming. Though he had rested, watered and fed the animal regularly, his horse was tired. Esteban himself, though young—hardly more than a beardless youth, indeed—was weary to his bones. For two nights and two and one-half days he had been without sleep; human flesh could have endured little more.

An hour before sunset, he halted on the southernmost escarpment of the mesa. Almost immediately he sensed a change. Rio Esperanza Valley spread southward and was lost in a far haze; Ciudad de la Paloma's adobe walls appeared soft and golden, as before his departure. But he saw no cattle grazing on the green lands of the small ranches that lay within the bounds of the great one. No horses were to be seen in the corrals. Though Ciudad de la Paloma—City of the Dove—was five miles away, he could have seen moving riders and vehicles in its streets, had any been there to be seen. Ciudad de la Paloma was not as before; whispers of loneliness, deserted range, empty corrals, and lifeless streets told their gloomy story.

They are gone, mused Esteban. *Fear at last has driven them out. My message of disaster is meaningless now.*

A narrow path wound downward from Mesa del Norte. He followed it with a new urgency. Not to deliver his own disturbing message, of course, but

to ascertain what had happened during his week's absence. Descending, he faced westward, and the sun lowered as he himself went down. He regarded it as of no particular moment then, but he did observe that the sun looked red, that the skyline beneath it was dark. Upon Mesa del Nore, he now remembered, a brisk southwest wind had been blowing. Now he concluded that a storm was rising, that by morning uplifted dust would begin to darken the earth—unless, by unexpected fortune, wind brought rain

TWILIGHT was in its streets when he at last rode into the small city of La Paloma. Nothing moved there until he neared the plaza of Iglesia de la Curadora Angel. Then what he at first mistook for a ghost ran from the shadows of this Church of the Guardian Angel and came to meet him.

"Esteban! Oh, Esteban!" Her voice was a small cry of gladness. It was a voice, too, that was strained by fear.

He reined his horse from what might have been public view into the shadows and dismounted. "Sonora!"

She ran into his arms and held tightly to him. "Oh, Esteban!"

He knew, of course, that something dreadful had happened—had already guessed what it was. Had not he, too, gazed in awe and dread at the strange images? Had not the panther and the fawn frightened him, as it had frightened others?

But he wanted her to tell him; in speech she might find release from the too-evident terror that gripped her. "Sonora, what is wrong? What has happened? Where is everybody?"

Senora looked into his face a moment. She was Spanish, a true descendant of the Conquistadores, she was seventeen—two years younger than he. Now that he held her in his arms. he was once more aware of her trembling.

"They are gone, Esteban," she told him, as if she were proclaiming the end of time. "They have fled to Sierra de la Mano—into the wilderness. Come; I will show you why."

She tugged at his arm. He left his horse and accompanied Sonora Menendez, as he had so often done since they were children. Had she not always been one who discovered mysteries; Had she not always sought him and said, *Come; I will show you?*

He surmised where she was leading him, but he did not spoil her mystery by allowing his curiosity to anticipate it. Yet, when she did show him this amazing thing that had occurred, he was more than surprised; her fear, for a moment, became a part of him. He stared in awe; his tongue and lips dried. He could easily have become terrified; he, too, could easily have fled from this deserted City of Fear.

Iglesia de la Curadora Angel faced south, as did all edifices begun as missions by the Jesuits and Franciscans. Southward lay Mexico. To those devout and fearless missionaires from Old Spain, Mexico was New Spain; it was fitting that missions should face the source of their faith and their strength. According to legend, this structure had been called San Bartolome by its founder and builder.

At first there had been only missionaries and Indians in this valley, where flowed the River of Hope. Then had come Spanish *superintendentes* who opened mines, or enlarged those already opened by Indians, on Sierra de Oro. Later had come Texans, Kentuckians, Tennesseans, some with wives, some without. Some stayed to live and die and leave descendants of their unmixed blood; some intermarried with Spaniards, some with Zunis and Hopis. Mixed-bloods intermarried with whole-bloods. In time they became a mixed race, with but few remaining pure-bloods among them. They were a simple, friendly, superstitious people, easily led, easily deceived.

Then there had come a prophet—a declaimer—one who declared himself a true believer, though what he truly believed, nobody completely knew. He was from everywhere, he declared. When pressed for specific information as to his origin, he declared that he was from the Kingdom of All-Glory. His faith was not of the Jesuits or Franciscans; his faith, though undefined, was hostile to all other faiths.

Consequently, when his power had become great, he took possession of San Bartolome. He climbed to its tower and with an ax chopped down its wooden cross; he served notice upon the then padre that he was *persona non grata* in Ciudad de la Paloma and would have to depart.

But they had parted as *friends*. Men much older than Esteban el Despierto remembered their parting scene. It had occurred here, beside this long, rectangular pedestal—the one upon which the fateful images stood, images of the panther and the fawn.

THERE Moses Horlick had gripped the hand of Padre Antenano. "Bless you, sir," he had said loudly, so that all could hear him and know that he cherished no hatred in his heart. "There will be no hard feelings between us, I trust?"

Tall, imperious Padre Antenano had smiled most unguilefully. "No hard feelings, Horlick. None at all."

"Fine! Fine! Then go in peace, sir."

"Thank you most kindly," Padre Antenano had responded graciously. "But before I depart, I would leave a present for you and for Ciudad de la Paloma." He had then indicated the bronze statuary, set solidly in the cement of the new pedestal. Like San Bartolome, whose name Moses Horlick had changed to Iglesia de la Curadora Angel, the bronze another faced south. In front of the panther shrank the bronze fawn; its attitude was that of fear, for the right paw of the panther had been raised aloft, ready to strike downward upon its neck.

"A strange sort of present," Horlick had commented. "But I can readily understand its symbolism. For centuries you Franciscans have been as panthers, ready to strike down the innocent. Now that you are leaving, the fawn will not be struck; so, let it stand as a symbol of your belated departure."

Padre Antenano had answered quietly, "Let it stand as a symbol."

Then they had shaken hands in great friendship, and Padre Antenano, accompanied by two pack-horses laden with presents and much gold, had ridden away to the south, never to return.

But as Esteban and Sonora gazed in awe and terror, he thought he understood something of the significance of Antenano's strange gift. It was a symbol of fear. No sooner had Antenano departed than a prophecy came into being. Someday, ran the prophecy, the panther would strike; someday the paw would descend upon the fawn's neck. Then Ciudad de la Paloma would die.

How that prophecy arose, Esteban did not know. He suspected that Antenano had planted it in the minds of his few faithful adherents, to be spread by them when he was gone. Possibly, also, it only grew from the natural superstitions of people who lived in the great loneliness of the still land. In this vast region of the lonely, many homes had been forsaken; cities had mysteriously died. Did the panther's paw move, or had expectation of it created in human minds a weird hypnotism, that caused them to see what had been prophesied, rather than that existed?

Esteban did not know the answer. He had thought of it much.

Sonora said, "It happened two days ago, Esteban. You know how it has been. Slowly, slowly, year after year, the paw has lowered, and the poor frightened fawn has dropped lower in its fear. Then two days ago, the gap

closed; distended claws sank into the fawn's neck. Somebody discovered what had happened; word spread like a swift wind. People were terrified. Some ran in the streets, screaming. Soon the plaza was filled. Moses Horlick made a speech propounded a prophecy; he said that La Paloma was to be destroyed, even as Sodom had been destroyed. Oh Esteban!"

HE FELT the tremors of fear in her as she stood against him. Esteban, too, was frightened, but he tried not to betray his feelings. "Courage, Sonora." After a while he asked, "Are all the others gone, indeed?"

"Everyone but me."

"And why did you not flee with the rest?"

"I could not; even though I was as frightened as anyone else, I could not go."

"Why could you not go?"

"You must know, Esteban. I had to wait for you."

Esteban put an arm about her and drew her close. "It was very foolish of you."

She did not look up. "Why was it foolish of me?"

Esteban listened, for a moment fancied he heard distant hoofbeats. "Because the danger is real," he told her. "I heard the report and started home at once, though later than others had started, I fear. Congress has confirmed Sorrel Gedney's claim to Rancho de la Manana Estrella. We have been betrayed by men we trusted. Instead of getting word to Congress that there is a town within the bounds of Rancho Estrella, the surveyor-general suppressed that information. Gedney's patent covers everything within the great star, including our little ranches, including our gold mines, including our town and our houses. We are now to become peons, tenants, slaves—or we may be driven out of our valley; we will be lucky if we escape with our lives."

Sonora's attention had become lost. She was staring at the statuary. "Look, Esteban!" she cried.

He looked, and saw what it was that suddenly had stilled her. The panther's distended claws had sunk deeper into the fawn's neck. Drops of blood had oozed out and were running down into the dust of the pedestal.

Sonora went limp in a faint.

"Sonora!" He caught her as she sank and rushed with her up the steps and into the church. There he laid her on the nearest bench.

"Sonora! Sonora!" He rubbed her hands, removed his hat and fanned her face. Dusk was all around them; he saw her face only as something ghostly pale in the gloom.

She moaned, stirred, and opened her eyes. He raised her slowly to a sitting position and sat beside her. "Quiet, Sonora."

Distantly came the hoofbeats of many horses.

"What does it mean, Esteban?"

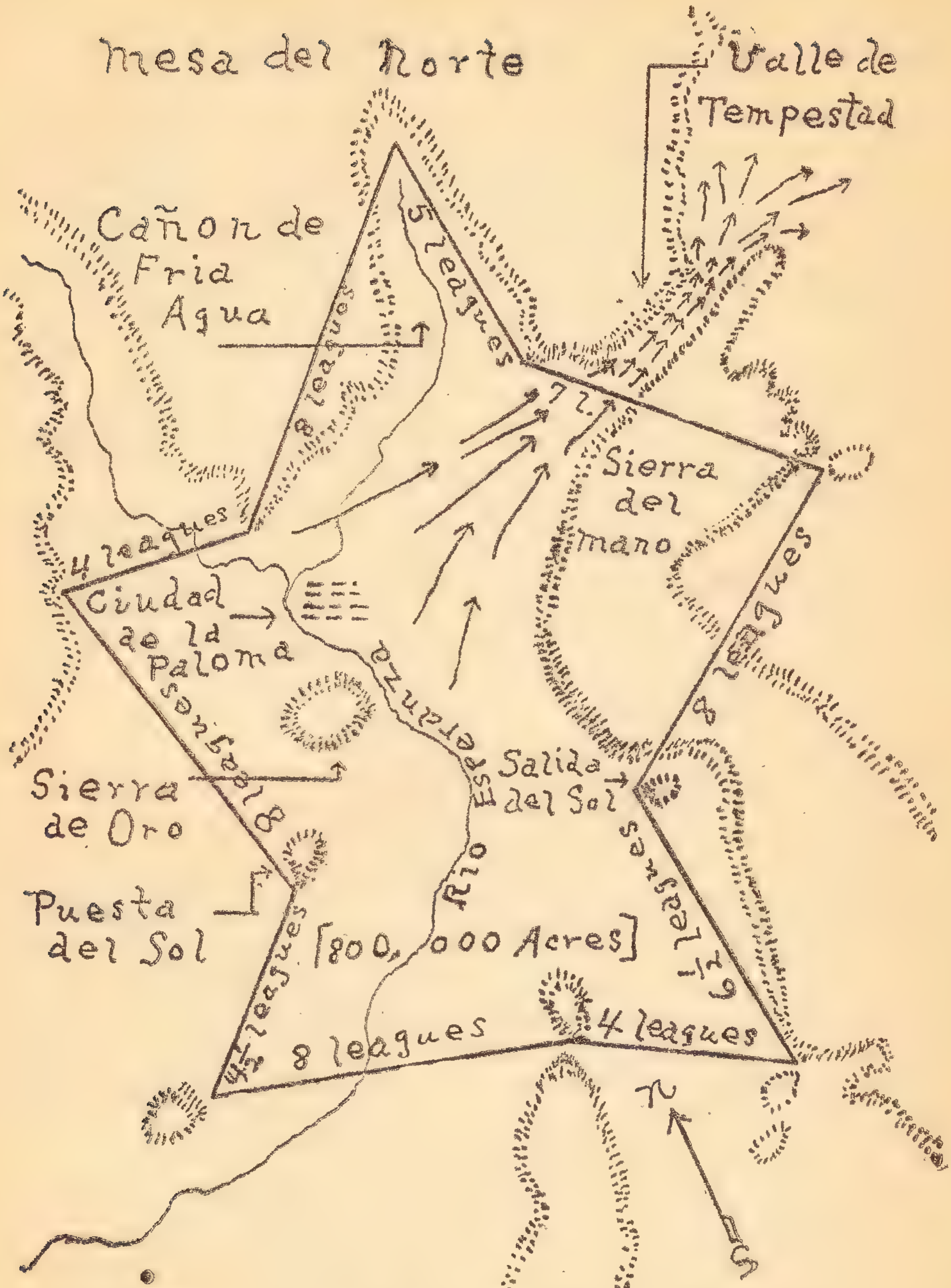
"It is only a guess, but I fear Gedney's riders have come. A large number of horsemen left Santa Fe ahead of me, for I was last to learn what Congree had done. Their appearance means no good for us. But courage, Sonora; come with me."

He led her to an alcove, near the entrance, from where they could see into the plaza, but where they could not readily be seen by persons outside. Soon the plaza was filled with riders—stubbled, hard-faced men with guns at their thighs.

One of their number lifted a hand. The others collected round him. He was a long-legged, stout-shouldered, middle-aged man with strong, commanding but ruthless features.

"Who is he?" Sonora whispered.

"Sorrel Gedney himself," Esteban answered; "he is losing no time. But listen."


Mesa del Norte
Valle de Tempestad
Cañon de Fria Agua
5 leagues
4 leagues
7 1/2
Sierra del Mano
6 1/2 leagues
Ciudad de la Paloma
Sendero
Esperanza
Salida del Sol
Sierra de Oro
Puesta del Sol
Rio
[800,000 Acres]
4 leagues
8 leagues
4 leagues
N
Rancho de la Mañana Estrella
[Ranch of the Morning Star]

THEY HEARD his rather slow, but heavy, determined voice. "It's a deserted town, that's plain enough. But where have they gone? And why?"

One of his men replied, "Maybe they've got wind of what's happened; maybe they've set an ambush for us."

Another said, "If they've gone, Gedney, well and good; it'll save us a lot of trouble. I don't mind shooting men—but younguns and women—"

"That was not my idea," Gedney retorted angrily. "I had no intention of murdering them, unless I have to; I meant for them to stay and work for me—on my terms, of course."

"But you can't have slaves any more, Sorrel; a war has settled that."

"There are more forms of slavery than one," said Gedney. "They've gone, but we'll bring 'em back. Only those who refuse to work will be killed; everybody who signs up as a tenant will get some pay—mighty little, but enough so it can't be called slavery."

"But where have they gone?"

"That we'll find out. They've drove off their stock; their wagons are gone. They can't get away like that without leaving tracks. We'll camp here and get on their trail tomorrow. Once my mind is made up, I don't stop."

"Esteban whispered to Sonora, "We've got to get away from here, and right now." He drew her after him back into the darkness of the church. They could see almost nothing, but they knew their way; they were soon leaving by a rear exit.

"My horse is saddled and ready" whispered Sonora. "It is only a little way."

Outside, Esteban said, "Wait here; I'll be back in a moment."

He slipped away, found his horse waiting, head down from weariness. He led him quietly and rejoined Sonora. Her own horse was under a cottonwood behind an adobe shelter. They mounted at once.

"Listen," Sonora murmured softly. "Riders."

Esteban had heard them, too. "They're spreading out," he said. "They may have decided to search the town before they make camp."

Three of them loomed darkly; they came toward Esteban and Sonora. But they stopped before an adobe dwelling. Their voices could be heard distinctly.

One said, "Do we look inside?"

"Not me," said another; "it's too dark."

"I don't barge into ambushes, if I know it," said the third.

The first one said, "We'll just circulate the town. If there's a trap, somebody will spring it; I'm hoping it won't be us."

Esteban moved close to Sonora. "Let's go; but take it easy. If they don't hear us, they won't likely see us."

They moved off, screened themselves behind buildings where possible. Esteban opened one of his saddlebags and lifted out his gunbelt and sixgun. He buckled them on and strapped the holster to his thigh. The moon had not risen. It was night now. Stars were out, but a haze moving at a great altitude obscured them.

Sonora kept her horse close to Esteban's. "Where are we going, Esteban?"

"To Sierra de la Mano. We shall join the fugitives of La Paloma—that is, if we make it out of this ticklish spot." He pulled to his right. "This way, Sonora." They had been riding generally northward. Now they moved eastward.

"Look out for them riders," somebody behind them shouted. "Head 'em off."

SUDDENLY hoofs pounded west of them. Somebody shouted, "Stop 'em."

Sixguns roared, and a man screamed.

Esteban and Sonora had come to the eastern edge of La Paloma. A bullet hissed by. Then another.

"Your horse is fresh," said Esteban. "It's up to you to get to La Mano as soon as possible."

"Enough," she cut in quickly; "I shall not leave you. If I had wished to do that, I could have done so two days ago."

"Then ride," he challenged, and put spurs to his horse.

Sonora raced beside him. "This is better." Men still shouted in La Paloma, and their guns thundered; but no further bullets passed over Sonora and Esteban. "I think," she said, "that they are confused; perhaps they are only shooting at one another."

Esteban looked back. La Paloma lay dark and indistinct; nothing moved on the flat land that lay between them and the town. "Slow down," he said. "It's a wise head you have, Sonora. They are not after us. Could somebody besides you have stayed behind in La Paloma?"

They slowed to walk. Sonora replied "I do not think so."

"You wouldn't think Moses Horlick left somebody behind with orders to burn the town?"

Sonora gasped. "But, no, I do not think so. He said La Paloma would be destroyed. It would have been like him to have it burned, but I saw no one these past two days. Do you know what I do think?"

"Tell me," he urged.

"I think," said she, "that fear still haunts our City of Peace."

- 2 -

THEY RODE straight east across the deserted flat land of El Valle de Rio Esperanza. A southwest wind blew against them, and they could see only enough of stars to keep on their eastward course; darkness was deep. To keep from losing each other, they rode side by side, almost touching. They proceeded slowly for Esteban's horse could take no more punishment.

About midnight, they came to the base of Sierra de la Mano. On a knoll among pines Esteban half-fell, half-slid from his saddle. "I've got to sleep, Sonora. Will you keep watch for a while?"

She dismounted. "Of course, Esteban. You must be very tired."

He stretched his long, slim body upon the natural bed of pine needles and was immediately asleep.

He awoke to a vigorous shake of his shoulder. "Esteban! You must awaken. They are coming after us, I think."

He came up, alert and uneasy. "Our horses—where are they?"

"They are back of us a way. I found a grassy place at dawn."

Dawn! Now it was day. Sunlight filtered slantingly through the dusty sky; it reduced night's darkness to a semi-twilight. Esteban ran to an open space that faced westward. Far away, toward La Paloma, a moving mass stirred up a dust cloud; riders, he thought. Sorrel Gedney was not one to stop, once his mind was made up. Esteban felt the heaviness of dread.

Sonora had brought up their horses in his absence. They ate a light breakfast of biscuit and water.

Sonora said, "You will think me a poor sentinel, Esteban."

"Why so?"

She was looking down. Long lashes shaded the soft olive of her cheeks. "I left you to your sleep, while I rode the rest of the night. But I found their trail; they turned northward, ascended Sierra de la Mano an hour's ride from here."

"Then we've no time to lose." Esteban swung up. Sonora mounted as quickly as he. Esteban said, "we'll keep behind trees and foothills. If Gedney's men should see us, they might speed up. They are so far away.

they could not cut us off; but every minute counts with us."

From the western slope of Sierra de la Mano, they saw Gedney's riders—still at a great distance. Gedney was not hurrying. On a day when the air was clean, they might have been distinguishable as individuals, but in the lowering haze they moved as a dark mass. If all who had collected in the plaza before the Church of the Guardian Angel were included now, there were almost a hundred of them—more than enough to enslave or destroy the peaceful fugitives of La Paloma.

There was no road along the slope of Sierra de la Mano; yet, cattle, horses, wagons and people had found a way up. It was something to cause amazement, even to Esteban, for the route was steep and filled with dangerous turns and passes. Still, nothing had been lost. It had been such a miracle of escape that on the summit of the tableland La Paloma's fugitives had paused—possibly to give thanks, or to hear another sermon from Moses Horlick. Indications were that they had rested several hours. Sparse vegetation had been grazed clean by cattle, and a considerable area was well-dotted with horse droppings.

Esteban and Sonora took a final backward look. Several miles out in the valley, Gedney and his men came on leisurely. In their hurriedness there seemed deliberateness and determination. Yet their advance was confident, as if they knew their quarry could not escape them.

A sigh of grief and fear caught in Sonora's throat. "It is not pleasant to feel you are being hunted and pursued like this; but what do they want of us, Esteban?"

Esteban turned his horse eastward. "I can explain as we travel, though the truth is hard to believe."

They found their course easily. It had turned northeastward.

ESTEBAN explained the situation as he understood it. "No lawyer in Santa Fe was interested in our troubles," he said. "I talked to three of them. Perhaps they had no ears, because I could promise no fee."

"And you could promise no worthwhile fee, because Moses Horlick would not let us make up a fund for protection of our rights."

"We should blame only ourselves" said Esteban.

"You mean we should not obey him?"

"You and I have never obeyed him" replied Esteban.

"But I interrupted your thought" said Sonora; "tell me why our enemies pursue us."

"It is a cruel story," he said. "In Santa Fe I did find one man who seemed trustworthy. He was a Mr. Laer, a good man whose father came West with early wagon trains over the Santa Fe Trail. Mr. Laer's father worked for a Mexican merchant. After the war with Mexico, the Mexican merchant took him in as a partner. Their sons are still partners, and they impressed me as being good men. They have seen adventurers come West and rob defenseless settlers of their lands; men like Gedney have taken what they wanted. New Mexico has become a land of cattle kingdoms, rustlers and marauding Indians. Sorrel Gedney wanted Ranch Estrella. He claims he bought it from heirs of Juan Serafin, but there is rumor that he merely killed the Serafins and forged a deed. Nevertheless, his title has been confirmed by Congress."

Sonora had kept her face northeastward; wind blew her thick black hair into streamers. Her mind had not left her first inquiry. "But what do they want of us, Esteban?"

"Did you not hear them while we were hiding in Iglesia Angel?"

"I remember there were many men on horses and that their leader was talking. But I was scared— I was thinking of the panther and the fawn.

I remember nothing they said in the plaza."

Esteban drew up sharply and dismounted. "A horseshoe," he said. "To a fugitive, more precious than gold." He knocked off its dirt against his bootheel and swung up again. The horseshoe he stored in his saddlebags.

Sonora said, "What do they want of us, Esteban?"

"That I was coming to," he told her as they rode on again. "Sorrel Gedney wants us to work the mines of Sierra de Oro—as his slaves. He means to drive us back to La Paloma; there he will force us to sign leases, agreeing to pay him rent on our own homes. According to Mr. Laer, Gedney will have us then. It is law that a tenant may not dispute his landlord's title. Those of us who will not sign, will be killed. When we have signed, we shall have to work for Gedney. What we get for our services will be enough to keep us alive—nothing more. We shall be slaves without realizing that we are in actual slavery."

"But why does he pursue us, as if we had no right to be free?"

"It is important to him that we do not get away. If we escape, we might reach Santa Fe; we might persuade the government attorney there that a fraud has been played upon Congress. A lawsuit is something Gedney could not face."

After a long silence, Sonora said, "What can we do, Esteban?"

"I suppose," he answered, "if they overtake us, a few of us will be of a mind to fight them."

Sonora, after a moment, said wretchedly, "And be killed. A few will fight them, and be killed."

Their wide trail turned slightly to their left and passed up to a higher level of the plateau. Esteban pulled right. "This way, Sonora."

"But the trail goes left."

He answered gently, "This way, Sonora. We are going to rest a while."

"Very well, Esteban."

THEY RODE downward and under the shelter of rimrock ledges. A mile or so thus, and they came to a damp, shaded canyon that spread into a green, cliff-locked cove.

"There used to be a drip spring here," said Esteban.

He found the spot he sought, and they dismounted. Water trickled from a ledge into a small pool. First they watered their horses, unsaddled them and released them to graze; then they drank and filled their canteens.

Esteban found, among many other small possessions in his warbags, a sunglass. Haze obscured the sun, but after a much longer time than was usually required for the lense, he had a fire going. They broiled bacon and warmed bread. Sonora, with a quiet, worried pride, rummaged a glass of plum marmalade from her saddlebags.

They were eating in silence when Sonora stared suddenly into the bushes at the edge of he cove. "Esteban! Look!"

He whirled and raised his sixgun, expecting to be faced by an enemy. "Well!" he said, and dropped his gun back into its holster. "What do you know about that! A cow and a calf."

Sonora's face lighted as she had a hopeful thought. "Esteban, do you know what I'm thinking?"

"No, but I can guess. You're thinking that we could build a cabin here and start a new life."

"Was it selfish of me?"

"If it was selfish of you, it was also selfish of me. Indeed, why should we not look out for ourselves? We had planned to be married soon, had we not?"

"Si, Senor Esteban; very soon. You were learning new ways to get gold from your mine in Sierra de Oro, and things would grow for you in your garden when they would not grow for others. In addition to being Esteban in the Vigilant, you are Esteban the Wise.

Even if we lose all we have in La Paloma, we can live here in this hidden place. Or we can go to Santa Fe. Why should we always incur the wrath of Moses Horlick—Padre Calamidad, he is fittingly called? Let others submit to his tyranny, if they will; you and I need not do so, Esteban."

Temptation was great. Esteban thought deeply; but he knew, as did Sonora, that this freedom they proposed was only a moment's dream.

He got up and gave her his hand. "We propose what we both know is impossible, Mia Favorita. We belong to them, and they to us; we cannot desert them in their time of danger."

"Of course," she responded. He could see her shake off the temptation the dream had cast upon her. "Please bring the horses, Esteban, while I tidy up."

They were soon riding on again. Esteban had been born to be a scout; he liked to venture into strange places. He had missed his calling. A gold-digger could not be a wanderer. But as a youth, he had ridden and camped alone for weeks in Sierra de la Mano. It was, indeed, a wilderness land, with sparsely growing pines, wide reaches of rimrock and desert, untouched range of upland grass and shrub. From maps he had seen in Santa Fe's land office, he understood why the region had been named Sierra de la Mano. Its shape was like that of a human hand, with an index finger pointing. *Mountain of the hand!* But its finger pointed only to desolation. East of La Mano lay a tossing sea of sandy waste.

ABOUT MID-AFTERNOON, Sonora came out of a long, troubled silence. "Esteban, we are not following their trail. Where are we going?"

"Don't worry," he said, "we shall find them; there is but one place to which they can go. Northeastward, toward the knuckles of El Mano, there is water. I have been there many times alone, a few times with my good friend Alfred Amison. If Moses Horlick will forget that he must follow his own nose, which he regards as *el dedo de Dios*, Alfred will guide them safely."

"And," said Sonora, "if Padre Calamidad will not listen to Alfredo, the cattle will listen. If there is water, *el dedo de Dios* will at least guide them."

Near sundown they came to the trail again; it continued on northeastward. But the sky had darkened, and when night fell there were no stars. They could no longer see the trail; nor could they see the rounded peaks of Las Nudillos—the knuckles of La Mano.

"We must go on, anyhow," said Esteban. "Tomorrow Gedney will overtake them; one night's warning will be little enough."

"But how can we go on, Esteban? I can barely see my horse's head."

"Our horses will take us there."

They kept going. They drifted with the wind and the scents of the trail.

After an hour or two, Sonora said, "Esteban, do you have faith?"

Her voice had sounded strange and distant in the wind. "Faith in what, Mia Nina?"

"That we shall live through this experience?"

"I do not think of it in that way, Sonora."

"How do you think of it, then?"

"That which troubles me, is whether we shall fight to live and be free. Among the people of La Paloma, there are at least fifty young men, and as many young women. Do they have courage, Sonora? Or do they, like our elders, live in fear of Horlick?"

"They live in fear, Esteban; they have been taught that to disobey Padre Calamidad is to disobey Los Dios."

"Then it is for you and me to teach them a new faith," said he.

They passed through a region of desert; then the land lowered into a mountain valley, small, but cool and sheltered somewhat from the persistent winds. They glimpsed a distant light. An hour

later they heard a man shouting. Soon thereafter they rode into the circle of light, where Moses Horlick was orating from the tailgate of a wagon.

"Behold!" he shouted, upon recognition of the newcomers. "The disobedient have come at last." He glared at them; the wind blew his white hair back from his bony face.

People turned their attention from Horlick to Esteban and Sonora. Several faces, invisible to the bearded declaimer, showed secret pleasure.

Several exclaimed, "Sonora! We feared you were lost."

Others said, "Esteban, we were afraid for you, too."

"Let them be brought hither," shouted Horlick.

They dismounted. Young men took charge of their horses. Esteban and Sonora advanced and looked up at Padre Calamidad.

"What would you have, sir?" Esteban asked politely, but without fear.

"I would have you punished. Did I not give orders that not one should remain behind?"

"Of that I know nothing," said Esteban.

"He was in Santa Fe," a young man shouted. "Of course he did not know of your orders."

"Alfred Amison, hold your tongue," answered Horlick.

"We speak for a friend," said another youth; "he was trying to help us."

Horlick glared downward and pinched his long white beard. "If this upstart cannot speak for himself, then let silence reign." He shifted his rheumy eyes to Sonora Menedez. "And you, Jezebel, why did you disobey?"

Sonora was not scared. In her upturned face there was only defiance. "I obey no tyrant, but come and go as I will."

"Ha!" growled Horlick. His wrath caused him to shake. He gave his right hand a sweep. "Let her be whipped."

No man moved. But three old women with witch-like faces stepped forward.

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STEBAN put an arm about Sonora's shoulders. "This sign means, *Do not touch.*" He gave those who approached a threatening look. "Sonora has done no wrong. She waited in La Paloma, in order that she might tell me where you had gone."

"She disobeyed me," shouted Horlick; "I teach obedience. I also require obedience. Here in this wilderness, my word shall be law."

"She is always a trouble-maker," cried a middle-aged woman. "It is time she learned what it means to make trouble for other people."

"Rather than allow a hand to be laid upon her," declared Esteban, "I shall take her away with me. That will be your misfortune, for I had a message for the people of La Paloma."

"It is I who bring messages to the people of La Paloma," Horlick screamed. "Now this false prophet would usurp my role. Let him be banished; let them both be cast out." Moses Horlick sought sternly for someone to carry out his command. His eyes fell upon a huge man with dark visage and a thick mustache. "Samson Castleman, my mighty man, you will whip them out of our camp."

Castleman seized a wagon whip. "Me whup 'em good." He came toward them slowly. The whip swept back and forth. "Go!" he shouted.

Esteban drew his gun. "One lash from you, Castleman, and you will die."

Murmurs of alarm rose on every hand. A man shouted, "Stephen, you don't know what you're saying. Put up that gun."

A fair-haired, daring youth stepped beside Esteban. He, too, had a gun. "Al-

fred Amison says that Stephen Devale knows what he is doing. You heard him say he has a message for us; do you want to hear it?"

"I do," a youth answered.

"So do I," another shouted.

Dozens of voices demanded to hear the message.

"No," screamed Horlick. "He shall tell his message to me; I shall decide whether it is a message fit for your ears." He clambered down from his speaking platform. "Fetch him to my tent; you men see that he comes."

Esteban leaped upon the tailgate which Horlick had vacated. Murmurs subsided. "We are about to become a divided people," he told them. "I do not wish to cause division—so, I will go to Moses Horlick's tent. But I will not go alone; Sonora will come with me as a witness. Alfred and our young friends will surround the tent and see that we are not disturbed."

He stepped down. Immediately he and Sonora were swept by the crowd to a small tent within a circle of wagons. Its flaps were thrown back and a lantern hung from its ridgepole, at the center. Below and back of the lantern Horlick sat as a white-haired, long-whiskered patriarch.

When Esteban and Sonora had entered, Horlick shouted to those outside, "Close the tent, and let no one disturb me in what I do."

The flaps were closed; voices outside sank to low murmurs.

Horlick scowled, then snapped at Esteban, "Your message, boy."

There was in his eyes a look of madness. This was familiar to Esteban and Sonora; they had never seen him any other way. Always there was that wild look, a shaking of his jaws and of his fist toward the sky. Now there was also hatred in his expression.

"My message is brief," said Esteban. "I am telling it to you, not because Sonora and I are afraid of you, but because we would not cause division among the people of La Paloma. You will convey our message to these people, as we convey it to you. If you do not, then Sonora and I shall tell them."

"Speak your message, rebel."

"It is this," said Esteban. "Congress has confirmed Sorrel Gedney's title to Rancho Estrella. Gedney with perhaps a hundred armed riders is camped tonight somewhere on Sierra de la Mano. Their purpose is to overtake the people of La Paloma and force them back to their town, where they are to be given a choice between slavery and death. Gedney will be upon us within two or three hours after daylight; that is our message."

HORLICK glared at him with immeasurable hate and treachery. "You lie, Stephen Devale; you have always been a liar, full of wild tales. What you do not know, you fabricate, so that everything you tell must sound big. Truly, Ciudad de la Paloma is to be destroyed. I, too, had a message to bring to these people; I have brought it. Fire and brimstone will fall upon La Paloma, and it shall be a city no more. These simple-minded people will remember me as their savior. I led them from their city; I led the into the wilderness, where they must wander until they have learned true obedience. Then I shall show them a new land and a new way to live.

"You, Stephen Devale, are a mere twig disturbed by a passing breeze; but I, Moses Horlick, have been and am a sturdy tree. People lean on me and find me strong; they find safety in the shade of my wisdom. Accordingly, I charge you to say nothing of this wild figment of your fabrications. Already my people are filled with fear; it would serve them ill if they lost faith in me and lent ear to a foolish youth."

Sonora tugged at Esteban's arm. "Let's leave him, Esteban. If he does not believe you. he will not believe me. Sorrel Gedney is near with a gang of men who make murder their business,

but what good does it do to tell that to Padre Calamidad?"

"What is that?" stormed Horlick. "What is that you call me?"

"I call you Padre Calamidad," replied Sonora. "That is what half the people of La Paloma call you—preacher of calamity. You fancy you led them from their city. You did not lead them; they fled because they were afraid. You merely came along, deceived yourself into believing you led them."

"And they were afraid," said Esteban, "because the images foretold destruction of La Paloma. If you would be wise, explain the images."

Moses Horlick was rigid with wrath. "You will see who leads these simpletons. Samson! Baxter! Wirt!"

Immediately, unexpectedly, Horlick's tent parted at the rear and the three whose names had been called rushed in. Samson was the giant. Baxter, or Bad Baxter, and Wirt, both beefy half-wits, grinned and stared at Esteban and Sonora in anticipation of some torture to be inflicted upon them.

"Do not shoot them, Esteban," Sonora whispered. "If you do, the people will not understand; they would tear you to pieces. You must live, that they may know their danger and not be without a leader."

"You speak wisely, Mia Favorita," said Esteban. "But we can escape. Walk backward. If the tent-flaps behind us are not tied down, make a dash for outside. At least one of us—"

"Seize them," said Horlick, his voice lowered in cunning. He nodded at his mighty men, and Samson lunged forward.

But Esteban anticipated his move and pushed Sonora aside. By the same effort, he forced himself from Samson's path, and the giant lunged on through the loose flaps of the tent. His right shoulder struck the upright pole a jarring blow. Horlock's lantern dropped and its light went out. A moment later Sonora screamed, then suddenly hushed. Esteban sprang toward her, but landed in the grip of powerful arms.

"Alfred!" he shouted. But the shout was half-stifled by a big hand. He kicked and squirmed, but in no time his wrists were gripped behind his back and he was lying face down, a heavy man's weight on top of him.

Horlick had sought the open. Outside, his voice rose, agitated, but meant to be reassuring. "My children, be ye not afraid. Evil is in our midst, but my faithful servants have it well in hand. Those two rebellious ones pretended they had a message for me. For me they had only blasphemous accusations; accordingly, they will be punished. Tomorrow I will announce their fate. Meanwhile—"

INSIDE THE tent a sudden hoarse roar overshadowed Horlick's speech. "Ow!" Bad Baxter groaned; "she bit me, Wirt." Then he roared again, and his lumpy body heaved back against Wirt and unseated him.

In that instant Esteban jerked free and struggled up.

"Esteban, this way." Sonora had got loose; she was at the rear of the tent.

A flailing arm struck Esteban and knocked him flat. He rolled onto his back, and as Wirt stumbled upon him gave the half-wit's stomach the force of both feet. Wirt grunted and his falling weight crushed Horlick's chair.

Then a lantern appeared. A quick movement brought its bearer into view. Alfred Amison had entered. Other young men crowded in with him; one seized a chair post and laid it across Wirt's head with quieting effect.

Esteban leaped up. "Sonora, where are you?"

"Here, Esteban," Sonora answered from outside.

Amison motioned for clearance, and a path opened for Esteban. Outside he stumbled over Bad Baxter, who had been clubbed into insensibility.

Esteban came erect to find Sonora in his arms.

"Oh, Esteban!"

He gave her a tight squeeze. "Are you hurt, Sonora?"

"Only scared, Esteban."

He looked round. "Where is Samson?"

Alfred grinned. "Don't worry about him; if he wakes up at all, it won't be soon."

Esteban released Sonora. He surveyed the crowd that had gathered; estimated there were about seventy-five young men and young women in it. Horlick was still declaiming in front of his tent.

"We've got to decide on something here," Esteban announced gravely. "We have enemies on Sierra de la Mano —possibly a hundred well-armed and hardened killers."

"Was that your message, Stephen?" someone asked from the crowd.

"It was," said Sonora, "and it is."

"Who are they?"

Esteban led Sonora away from the tent. "I think we'd best withdraw from here and decide what's to be done." They moved beyond the wagons and gathered in a circle round Esteban and Sonora. Esteban repeated his story: Sorrel Gedney now owned Rancho Estrella. He and his gunmen were encamped somewhere on Sierra de la Mano. Gedney would not be interested in old people for his schemes; he would be interested only in the young and strong. "So," Esteban concluded, "what do you propose we do?"

"I propose we fight them," said Amison.

"With what?" asked Sonora.

A youth looked at a wooden club he had used on Bad Baxter. "Yes, with what?"

"We have guns," another said. "In all our families together, we could collect at least a hundred."

"Collect them," said Esteban; as they stirred to leave, he lifted a hand. "Wait a moment."

AN UNINVITED one had entered their circle—a man about forty years of age, a worried, sturdy individual of unmixed blood named Walt Clane. "Excuse me for stickin' my nose in here, but have any of you younkers got a spare horseshoe?"

All waited for somebody else to answer. Spare horseshoes were scarce and prized above treasure, especially at a critical time such as this. Heads moved slowly in negation.

Esteban had an inspiration. "Do you mean that one of your horses has lost a shoe?"

"That's what I mean," replied Clane.

"Where?"

"I wish I knowed; but it was somewhere back there on the mountain."

"Well," Esteban said musingly, "this looks like a problem for Padre Calamidad. No doubt his all-seeing eye can tell you where to find it. Or, better still, through his mighty power, he might even cause it to reappear. Which wagon is yours?"

Clane pointed. "That one there with the spliced tongue."

"And there's no spare shoe in your wagon box?"

"No."

"Come," said Esteban. "We must call upon Horlick."

They went at once and found Horlick orating loudly, frenziedly. He especially reminded his listeners of his power and his mighty works.

He paused in his ranting and glared at Esteban's crowd. "What is the meaning of this disturbance?"

Esteban urged Walt Clane forward. "This worthy man has had misfortune."

"Let him speak for himself," growled Horlick.

Sonora whispered to Esteban, "You found a horseshoe," Esteban; remember?"

"I remember," he whispered back. "But don't let anybody know about it."

Clane stood facing Horlick. "One of my horses throwed a shoe and is lame.

I—we thought maybe you, bein' a man of visions and such like, could tell where it was lost. If I knowed where to look, I'd go for it at daylight."

"Not only that," said Alfred Amison, "we thought maybe you—being a man of great power, magic, and such—could make Clane's horseshoe show up right here in camp."

Horlick glared from face to face. Had he not, indeed, boasted of his wisdom and power? Had he not grown rich through his pretensions of having super natural powers? He said, "If I had a mind to do so, I could tell you where to look."

"But you don't want to help me, is that it?" asked Clane.

Esteban whispered to Sonora, who whispered to Amison.

"Amison said, "you are called Padre Calamidad by us who doubt your wisdom and your claims of power. But Stephen Devale, he is called Stephen the Wise; many are we who think *he* should be our leader. Have you not often preached about Elijah, who brought fire from heaven, when the prophets of Baal had failed to fetch it? The time has come when it should be decided whether you or Stephen Devale is the true prophet."

A half-breed named Cameo Martinez shouted, "we would have a sign."

Horlick had furrowed his brow into a fearful frown. "Ye rebellious sons and daughters of perdition, I will give you a sign. Let everyone be silent while I commune with powers."

HORLICK stiffened himself, closed his eyes and lifted his arms straight up. His hands closed into tight, bony fists. While Horlick went into his customary trance, Esteban nodded to Amison and they sank back out of sight.

"Alfred," Esteban said, "Clane's horseshoe is in my saddlebags; I found it back there on La Mano. Get it and hang it over the righthand stay-chain of Clane's wagon. Get two or three you can trust to go with you, and make sure you are not caught in your trickery. Hurry back and let me know by a nod when it is done. Do you know which wagon is Clane's?"

"It has the spliced tongue. I would know it, too, by its overly-dished front wheels."

"You will need a hooded lantern; be sure you make no mistake."

"It will be done right," said Amison.

When Esteban rejoined Sonora and their young friends, Horlick was still in his trance. But he was drawing his fists downward slowly. When they reached bottom, Horlick's body shuddered, then relaxed.

He said, "Look ye in Coy Dederick's wagon box. There you will find what you seek."

A crowd rushed away with lanterns. In a short time they were back with several horseshoes.

"But it ain't none of these," said Clane. "These are rusty; mine would be shiny, for it has been lost only a few hours."

A youngster said, "Padre Calamidad knew Coy Dederick always carried many spare horseshoes. That is why he said—"

"Silence," shouted Horlick. "When this rebellion is over, I shall have your tongue cut out; I shall punish all of you, who have doubted my power"

"Esteban," a mixed-breed cried. "We would have Esteban show his power."

Sonora whispered, "Oh, Esteban, this is dangerous; I'm afraid for you."

"We are faced with a greater danger than this, Favorita. It will soon be daybreak, and we have done nothing to meet that danger."

"Come, Stephen," somebody shouted. "Produce the horseshoe."

"Si, Senor Esteban."

"The horseshoe, Stephen."

"Esteban el Despierto. Esteban el Sabio."

Esteban stepped forward, but stood several feet from Horlick, whom he distrusted completely. "Before I undertake

this test," he said, "I ask what the stake is. Is it merely one horseshoe, or is it leadership in this hour of peril?"

"What peril, Esteban?" a woman shouted. "Was that our message? Is that what you meant to tell us?"

"Silence, woman!" screamed Horlick. "Messages come only from me. To your work, Stephen the Fool."

"Let Esteban speak," a tall, strong breed said respectfully. "If there is danger about us, we would know it and prepare to meet it."

"There is very great danger," said Esteban. "Sorrel Gedney—"

A woman screamed, "Gedney?"

Gedney! Gedney! Gedney! The name ran through the crowd like a chant of death.

"To your test, Stephen Devale," screamed Horlick. He glared at the people of La Paloma, whose worried faces had taken on terror. He said, "This young upstart is a scoundrel and a blasphemer. He covets my power; he is impatient to rule over you. Destroy him. Destroy him, I tell you, before it is too late."

"The horseshoe, Esteban," a woman called impatiently. "Let us see who has the power."

Esteban's roving eye caught sight of Alfred Amison, who had shoved his way into the inner circle. He looked at Esteban, nodded slowly.

ESTEBAN said, "If we may now have a moment's silence, we shall see what we shall see." When noises subsided, he dropped to his knees and with his bare hands drew sand and dust into a cone. This he flattened by slowly moving his right hand back and forth across it. He then lifted a handful of sand above it and let it run out slowly. As the sand fell, the dust mixed with it was blown away by the winds of La Mano. Sometimes the dust streamed thinly; sometimes it whipped upward. Esteban repeated the performance until he had gone through it four times. On the fourth, dust whirled upward into a small cloud, which disintegrated into strange figures and designs and was snatched away by wind just as an over-wrought woman screamed hysterically.

Esteban stood up. "Yes," he said calmly. "That is right; if Clane will search his own wagon, he will find his horseshoe."

This time the whole crowd surged away, except only Horlick, Esteban, and a few skeptics who regarded both of them as frauds and fakers.

Moses Horlick lifted his right fist skyward and shook it vigorously. "Stephen Devale, El Diablo should be proud of you. You knew, of course, that Clane carried an extra shoe, which he had forgotten."

"*You* knew, of course," retorted Esteban, "that Dederick always carried a plentiful supply of extra horseshoes in his wagon. You are not without cunning, Moses Horlick; but you have hoodwinked these good people long enough; it will be extremely unwise of you to dispute my leadership in this crisis."

"I shall dispute you and hound you into your grave, Stephen Devale," returned Horlick, his voice vibrant with hate and vengeance. "La Paloma will be destroyed. We shall wander in the wilderness, where my power will be supreme."

Esteban contemplated Horlick from narrowing eyes. "You keep saying that La Paloma will be destroyed. I think I know why you say it. You left one of your stupid slaves behind with instructions to burn our city, didn't you?"

"You lie," Horlick screamed.

"I do not lie," said Esteban, convinced by Horlick's vehemence that he had guessed correctly. "Your henchman was hiding in La Paloma, no doubt feasting for a time on the good things that were left behind. Sorrel Gedney's men searched the houses. They flushed your evil slave and shot him as he tried to ride away; I heard him scream when

he was hit. Sonora and I were riding east. So was he. That explains why bullets came near us; your arsonist was trying to flee to La Mano."

Horlick's knees buckled slightly. Then he leaped into the air, his right fist shaking upward. "You lie, fool. You were always a liar."

His words were then drowned by a shout from the crowd. "It's here! The horseshoe is here! Esteban! Esteban!"

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THEY CAME shouting back, hundreds of young and old. "Esteban! Esteban el Despierto! Esteban el Sabio! Esteban el Profeta! Stephen Devale should be our leader. He is the wise one."

They formed a great circular mass. Those in front held up their lanterns. Clane was shoved forward. "Show them," the people cried. "Is it the one?"

Clane held up the shining horseshoe. "It is the one," he declared stoutly. "It was throwed up onto a stay-chain of my wagon. Stephen the Wise is also a prophet."

"We want Stephen," some shouted. Others, "We want Esteban."

Esteban reached the wagon that Horlick had used as a speaker's platform. He sprang up and lifted a hand for silence. Then he said, "I would not deceive you, as Moses Horlick has deceived you for so many years; neither he nor I has any supernatural power. Horlick knew the habits of Coy Dederick, and told you to look in his wagon—knowing you would find extra horseshoes there. I used as much dishonesty as he; Walt Clane's horseshoe was in my saddlebags, where I put it when I found it back on the plateau. I had a few trusted friends put it on the righthand stay-chain of Clane's wagon. I apologize for deceiving you."

There were murmurs; many were ashamed that they had been so gullible.

Esteban continued, "But leadership of a kind, I will accept. At this critical moment, we need fighting men and women. That kind of leader I will endeavor to be. All who have guns will see that they are loaded. There will be a fight, but *we* shall choose the battleground.

"Once more let me tell you what is at stake. Long before our war with Mexico, there was a town called Ciudad de la Paloma, which meant City of Peace. Then a man named Juan Serafin obtained a grant of land from the government of Mexico. He represented that his land was to be colonized by Mexicans. Hence, he was allowed an *empresario* grant of over three-quarters of a million acres. He called it Rancho de la Manana Estrella, or Ranch of the Morning Star. He said nothing about our town.

"Then, years after the war between our country and Mexico, one Sorrel Gedney—at first an ordinary bandit, then leader of a small army of marauders—decided to settle down and become a cattle king. The Serafin heirs were all killed—by whom they were killed is probably best known to Sorrel Gedney. Not long after their deaths, Gedney showed up with a deed supposedly signed by the Juan Serafin heirs. Claiming ownership of Rancho Estrella, he had a survey made and applied to Congress to have his title confirmed, which was the practice after the treaty with Mexico. Nor did Gedney say anything about our town of La Paloma. Congress confirmed his title. Gedney, like Serafin, was guilty of fraud; and someday, if times are ever peaceful; and law-abiding again, it may be possible to have this fraud exposed by legal means and Gedney's title set aside. But until then, there is

no help for us, except within ourselves. We must fight."

"We will fight," a young man shouted. Others joined him. The sentiment was taken up by many voices.

"In Santa Fe," Esteban resumed, "I learned much about Sorrel Gedney. He bought off or frightened all who might have helped us. There I was warned, too, that he would ride into our town and kill any who opposed him. He is a man who stops at nothing, a man who prides himself in that he never turns back, that he is as relentless as death itself. He has been correctly described. A few minutes after my return to La Paloma, Gedney and his murdering band rode into town. Sonora Menendez and I saw them and overheard their talk. Gedney will give us a choice. We are to become his tenants and slaves, or be killed. You know what that means. Older ones among us will be killed. Those who are young, useful and submissive will be spared. But those who submit will be forced to work for Gedney for only enough to keep us from starving. Sonora will bear me out when I tell you that Gedney and his men are on our trail, that they are this night encamped within a few miles of this very spot."

"Sonora!" a girl cried. "Let her tell us."

SONORA was hustled to the wagon and lifted up beside Esteban. She was nervous, but she got hold of herself. "It is true," she told them earnestly. "Esteban and I were standing by Iglesia de la Curadora Angel; we were staring at the images. While we were there, the panther's claws sank deeply into the neck of the fawn, and blood ran out and trickled down into the dust."

"Oh!" a woman screamed.

A murmur of fear swept over them.

Sonora continued, "I think I fainted. Anyway, when I regained my senses, Esteban and I were inside the church, and the plaza of La Iglesia was filled with riders. It was almost dark. That made it possible for us to escape from the church and from La Paloma. But next morning we saw them following your trail across El Vale de Esperanza."

"This," said Esteban, "is no place for a battle."

"Where is the place, Esteban?" an old man asked.

Esteban drew himself erect. Here he would meet his test of strength. But he said fearlessly, "The place is Ciudad de la Paloma."

Murmur of objections ran through the crowd. "No, no," they muttered. "Not there, not there; La Paloma is to be destroyed."

Moses Horlick, who had listened and observed in sullen wrath, now saw a breach into which he might drive his own influence. He lifted a fist and shouted, "Do not listen to this young fool; he will lead you to your destruction. Follow me, and I will lead you to safety."

"Follow him and you will be destroyed," replied Esteban. "But it is far from our wish that he be cast aside. Let him still be our spiritual leader, for assuredly we shall need comforting; I propose that we stand together."

"No," screeched Horlick. "I shall be your leader in *all* things. Let all who would follow this blasphemer join him now. All who still believe in me, gather yourselves about me."

"We must not become divided," cried Esteban.

"We *are* divided," retorted Horlick.

Esteban watched the division begin. Many people, especially the older ones, drifted toward Horlick. Middle-aged and young people sided with Esteban.

He accepted the division as an accomplished fact. He addressed those who had sided with him. "Let everyone see that his horses have been watered. Fill your water kegs and canteens and hitch up your teams. Until we can return for them later, the cattle will be

left behind, to graze where they will not die of thirst. Our enemies seek us, not our cows."

A man of mixed blood pushed toward Esteban. "Senor, may I speak?"

"Certainly, Ansonio."

Ansonio said, "Pedro Montoza and me, we go up to poco collado. You know, Senor, the hill above us there. Me an' Pedro, we see light of torches. Very dusty, but for a little there is clear air. We see far then. Enemy come."

Esteban considered a moment. Ansonio was a trusted citizen of La Paloma. "How many torches, Ansonio?"

"Many torches, Senor."

Esteban considered quickly. "Men will attend to horses and wagons; women will fill the water kegs. We shall move the instant everyone is ready. All unmarried young men and young women will collect guns and load them. Small children will look after babies until we are ready to march. To your work."

THEY MOVED according to varying moods, some in panic, some dazedly, some with precision and intelligence.

Those who had taken sides with Horlick were caught in the tide of preparation. Matters of allegiance were forgotten; soon all were ready to travel. Only Horlick remained aloof. There were not enough wagons to accommodate all who would have liked to ride. Many, including dozens of stout women, had to walk.

Esteban had guns distributed to men who looked capable of using them. To the young men he assigned side guns and cartridge belts. When all were ready, he ran toward the easternmost wagon.

"I shall go before," he announced. "There is a way down that I can show you. Daylight is almost here; we must move with vigor."

He called a small group around him and gave hurried instructions. Horses had been assigned to men and women who could not have kept up on foot.

"Alfred," he said to his friend, "you will command the young men with side guns."

"What is our position?" asked Alfred.

"You will be a rear guard until a halt is called; report to me then."

Esteban moved eastward, Alfred westward.

Esteban placed himself ahead of the foremost wagon. "Follow me."

A shrill scream rose behind him. "No, no." Moses Horlick had moved in on foot and was waving his hands between Esteban and the wagon. "You will follow Moses Horlick, as you've always done. Forward!"

Esteban had no objection. He moved ahead, and wagons, riders, and pedestrians began their march. Esteban observed that Horlick was following in his footsteps, not trying to go before, but persuading himself that he was leading his people.

Because of darkness, their progress was slow. Then at dawn a wind struck from the southwest. It was a sudden and terrific blow, and hats and loose articles went whirling and flapping away. Storm brought back the night, and he had to call from time to time in order to make his whereabouts known.

Before long he began to feel unsure of his direction. It was then that he remembered himself as Esteban el Despierto. In his pocket he carried a small compass. This he brought quickly into his hand. By close study of its needle, he was able to set his course. He moved west of north, ten degrees.

"Esteban!" a familiar voice called.

He kept on his course, but that voice had awakened new thoughts.

"Esteban!"

Sonora was closer now.

Horlick's old voice shrilled, "Get thee behind me, Jezebel."

Esteban stopped and turned back. Sonora was struggling with Moses Horlick. Padre Calamidad had found a walking stick. He was striking at Sonora.

ESTEBAN caught the stick and wrenched it from Horlick's trembling hand. Sonora pulled herself free. She and Esteban walked then together.

"Did he hurt you, Sonora?"

"Only a little."

"Why did you do this?"

"Do what, Esteban?"

"Leave your people and friends back there?"

"I wanted to be with you."

"Do you wish to do something to help me?"

"Of course, Esteban."

"Then carry this." He handed her his compass.

"What is it, Esteban el Sabio?"

"It is a compass. Its needle points due north."

"But we are not going as it points."

"We are on a course ten degrees west of north. Could you keep us on that course, Sonora?"

"I don't know. Why do you ask me?"

"You may have to be our guide; I shall explain later."

"Where are we going, Esteban?"

"We are heading straight toward El Valle de Tempestad."

"Oh, no, Esteban. We would all be lost."

"Not if you do your part, Sonora."

"What am I to do?"

"You are to guide us across the Valley of Storm."

"But I can't, Esteban; I can't."

"Of course you can. All of our lives depend upon it."

Sonora fell silent. She carried the compass, studied it carefully, learned to follow its magnetic guidance.

About noon they descended Sierra de la Mano and halted opposite the place where Mesa del Norte reached its farthest point south along El Valle de Tempestad. Those who walked had gradually pressed ahead of wagons and riders. They crowded round Esteban, Sonora and Moses Horlick.

Horlick shouted, "Now, listen to me, you people of La Paloma, and I will tell you what to do." He began to shake his fist upward and to make a haranguing speech.

But nobody heard him, so fearful was the force of the wind.

Also, an elderly man rode hurriedly up. "Esteban, Gedney's men are close behind us. We got a glimpse of them back on the slope, when the wind veered for a few seconds. Gedney shouted for us to halt, or he'd start shooting."

"I heard no shots," said Esteban.

"He didn't shoot; the wind changed and blotted us out."

"We've no time to lose," said Esteban. Horlick was still orating, but Esteban explained to those nearest him, "Sonora will be our guide from here."

"Oh, no," men shouted mutinously.

"You will do as you are commanded," said Esteban. "Sonora has a compass; these last hours she has learned how to use it."

"Where is she guiding us?" a sturdy woman demanded.

"She will guide us across the valley," said Esteban. "It is a distance of three miles. Follow Sonora and you will live. Hold hands or extend ropes from one person to another. This will be your lifeline; do not break it."

A young man rushed up. "Esteban, I'm from Alfred Amison. He says Gedney is too close for him to leave his position. What are your orders?"

"Tell Alfred to continue as rear guard. We are going to move ahead at once. I shall drop back and join him soon."

The youth disappeared into the darkness of wind and dust.

MOSES HORLICK concluded his speech; he shouted something, but

nobody heeded his voice. He waved his right hand in a summons to the people of La Paloma to follow him. He stepped out into the blinding storm of sand and dust. In an instant he had disappeared, driven northeastward by the wind.

Esteban pulled a stout woman close to Sonora. "You will be her support, if she stumbles. Do not let her fall; if necessary, carry her."

"Si, Senor Esteban. Will do."

Esteban stuck pieces of cloth into his ears and, holding Sonora with one hand, he reached back with the other for the hand of a young girl. Thus began the lifeline.

"Let's go, Sonora."

"Oh, Esteban, it is too much—to much."

"It is much," said Esteban. "Indeed, you are about to undertake the longest three miles of your life; but you can make it."

"If you will go with me, Esteban."

"I shall go a little way, until you are over your fright. Then I must join Alfred and his rear guard. When you have reached the north side, turn west, follow the foothils, and you will come to Canon de Fria Agua. Wait for me in the canyon."

"Will you come, Esteban?"

"I shall come, Sonora."

They moved slowly, for the wind drove against them. They could see almost no distance ahead. In places the hard earth was swept bare; in others, ridges of shifting sands formed barriers to their progress. Sonora, her eyes squinted upon the compass, stumbled against the sand and fell. Esteban and the stout woman who walked on her other side promptly lifted her. They cimbed over the treacherous ridge and stumbled and slid down its northern slope.

Those who followed began to crowd up and walk in a double line. Some had ropes, to which many held. Where there was no rope, they joined hands. Esteban discovered another strong woman of mixed blood close at his heels. He released the hand that he had been holding and drew the woman up beside Sonora. "See that Sonora does not fall, Canina. You and Maria will be her protectors, help her to keep going."

"Si, Senor," responded the one called Canina.

He backed away then, saw Sonora disappear into the fearful blackness. The lifeline was holding. Women, children, men trudged by, ghostly and frightened and silent. Esteban moved in the opposite direction, met riders and wagons. They, too, had strung ropes from rider to rider, from wagon to wagon.

Esteban made no attempt to count them. No census of La Paloma had ever been taken. He estimated that about one thousand people were passing through the storm, their lives dependent upon the stamina of Sonora Menendez and her compass.

BEHIND the last wagon came Alfred Amison, his small force of youths, and about forty middle-aged men who had joined them. Esteban halted them; by shouting, he made himself heard.

"We will form ourselves into a large circle, with the trail cutting through the middle of it. If Gedney comes—"

"He *is* coming," said Alfred. "We had a glimpse of his riders a few minutes back."

"Then," said Esteban, "you, Alfred, and Joyce Morey will hide near here in the sand and wait until all of Hedney's riders have passed."

He pointed out several others. "The circle will form from here. About thirty of you will walk into the wind. The first will stop at ten paces, the second at twenty paces, and so on. Bend slightly to your right. When fifteen have stopped, the others will form a curve back to the trail. Those

on my left will take the other side and curve back against the wind. I shall take the rest of the young men and drop them along the trail.

"Everyone must lie down and conceal himself as best he can. Five of us will go farthest in and lie across Gedney's path. When you hear a shot, it will be the one that has killed Sorrel Gedney. After that, you will shoot at any rider's back which you see. They will all be within our circle; they will find it hard to escape. If one rides toward you, play dead, and let his horse step over you. Whatever else you do, don't get on your feet. We shall be here the rest of the day, and through the night. Your orders are to shoot anything that rides or walks. Adios."

Amison and Morey spread apart and lay down in the streaming sand. Others disposed themselves as directed, some into the wind, some with it. Esteban moved farther out along the trail, which could still be seen in the sand drifts. He dropped his companions one by one, until he and four others remained. These he ranged across Gedney's line of pursuit.

He had hurriedly described Sorrel Gedney and concluded, "Gedney will be in front; if he comes your way, kill him."

They lay down in the sand then, drew their guns, and waited.

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AS ESTEBAN had expected, first to appear was Gedney himself. For an instant he was visible in a wind-pocket; then he was blotted out by streaming dust. He was superbly mounted on a great red horse. The sand was deep; the horse stumbled, but steadied and plowed straight toward Esteban.

A moment later, Esteban disregarded his own orders to shoot only at backs. From the blackness, Gedney emerged, distinct in the swirling tempest. His horse's right front hoof planted itself deeply in sand at Esteban's side. The target was too good, the temptation too great. Esteban fired upward. Gedney, stooped to keep an eye on the trail, received the slug in his heart. He grabbed at his chest and fell; he lay still in the sand.

Two or three other riders saw Gedney fall. Their horses reared, but the riders drew their guns. They could see nothing; they merely fired at what they imagined they saw. Then Esteban's four companions found targets; their guns, though close, sounded far off and without echo. Soon the dull sounds of other shots drifted with the storm or cut across its currents.

Riders began to shout at one another, "Spread out; we're in a trap." Their voices, strained and pitched to full volume, were whipped into nothingness by the frightful roar of wind and hiss of racing sand.

Whether by design or as a result of confusion, they scattered. Then shots came from an ever-widening circle. Men screamed as they were hit; a horse squealed. After a few minutes a man came riding darkly with the wind. Esteban lay still; the horse stepped over him, and there was a shot—another of Gedney's killers lay sprawled beside Esteban.

Other minutes passed. There were other shots, then two in quick succession. Half an hour later a bewildered horseman loomed up, riding against the wind. Esteban's companion farthest left fired, and the rider fell within reach of Esteban, where he lay dead.

Throughout the afternoon there were sounds of gunfire. They ended at nightfall.

Late in the night lightning and thun-

der began to roll through El Valle de Tempestad. Torrential rain beat down the dust and stilled the sand. Before daylight the clouds cleared away; a full moon washed the dreadful valley. There was wind, but it no longer obscured either land or sky.

Esteban looked about. To the south Sierra de la Mano loomed darkly; to the north, Mesa del Norte. Eastward stretched an eerie wilderness of sand. Scores of riderless horses stood or wandred aimlessly among the dunes. No human being stirred, but many dead men sprawled darkly. Esteban suspected that many of them had fallen victim to guns in the hands of friends, not of enemies. Anyhow, there were many dead; there would be no slavery.

Esteban waited for almost an hour. When reassured that no enemy was alive in their vicinity, he called to his companions.

"Moxie!"

"Here!"

"Sherrod!"

"Here!"

They continued to answer his calls. His word was carried on, until the farhtest one had it. Men and boys arose then in a great, irregular circle. They came across the sand and gathered around Esteban.

"The fight is over," Esteban said. "We'll take their horses as spoils of war."

AT DAWN they sent one of their number ahead to announce the coming of Esteban and the others. Along their route they came upon three overturned wagons. Household articles were scattered helter-skelter. Later they found a dead horse; it had broken a leg and been killed.

By daybreak, the fugitives of La Paloma had reached the Canyon of Cold Water; there they had fortified themselves on a high promontory above the stream.

Esteban found Sonora in command.

"She threatened us," a woman informed Esteban.

"Threatened? Just how could she do that?" he asked in surprise.

"She said to us, *'You will do as I say, or I shall report you to Esteban.'* We did what she said."

Esteban kept a straight face. "It is well you did; I can tell you that."

Two days later they were back in Ciudad de la Paloma. As soon as they could unload their belongings and put up their teams, they gathered in the plaza of Iglesia de la Curadora Angel.

"Look! Look!" they began to shout. "The panther has lifted its claws. The fawn is free."

Esteban caught Sonora's arm and led her through the crowd. It was true; an inch separated the uplifted paw from the fawn's neck. People stared in wonder, some in fear.

Sonora held fast to Esteban. "What does it mean, Esteban?"

He remained silent and thoughtful for many seconds. He put his hand upon the panther, then upon the fawn, suspecting they were not the rigid bronze he had always regarded them. But they were; they did not move at his touch. Nor could he move them by by force.

He glanced about at the wondering people. They were watching him, waiting for his answer. He said, "It means we need no longer be afraid; it means we need to work hard and have courage, to believe only that which is true, and to do no evil."

"Esteban es juicioso," observed an ancient Spanish-Cibolan cross-breed. "With him to lead us, we are not afraid. Esteban es sabio. Esteban es bueno."

"You speak kindly, Jose de Cibola," said Esteban.

Further remarks were postponed.

A stranger had appeared from nobody knew where. But all eyes turned in his direction as he came riding into the crowd. "Make way," he shouted.

He was a young man—twenty-five, possibly. His face was smooth, thin, somewhat bony. His eyes were round and staring. Thick black hair hung below the brim of his round, black hat. A lane was made for him, and he rode along it, staring haughtily at people who gawked at him from either side.

He dismounted and stood on the steps of La Curadora Angel. "Silence!" he shouted.

People looked from the stranger to Esteban and back at the stranger.

"Who is he?" was asked my many.

Esteban, holding Sonora by the arm, pressed through the crowd and stood before the stranger. "Who are you, if I may ask?"

The stranger stared at Esteban. "You are mighty young to be putting questions to me, but I shall construe the question as one coming from all of these people. And who am I, indeed? I am he who has heard a voice; I am one who has the gift of magic; I am the Lion of Seven-times-seven; I am the Central Pillar of the All-Glory. I have come to save these people from their evil ways. I have come to rule over them and to lead them in paths of rectitude."

HE CERTAINLY would have made a speech, had not old Jose stumbled up the steps and peered into his face. Jose studied him closely, then he turned to face the people of La Paloma. "It's him," he cried tremulously; "it is Moses Horlick."

Unbelief swept over the people. "No-o-o-o-o," they cried fearfully. "Not Horlick again."

Jose was insistent. "But I was here long ago, when Moses Horlick came to Ciudad de la Paloma. I, Jose de Cibola, was a young man then. My memory was good. Jose cannot be mistaken; Moses Horlick has come back, just as he came in the beginning."

Esteban saw looks of terror beginning in people's faces. It was not good for people to be afraid. He said to the stranger, "Can you pray for sick people?"

The other eyed him scornfully. "I can do what I can do. It is not for you to ask; it is for you to obey."

"It was that way that Moses Horlick talked," declared Jose de Cibola. "He was the Lion of Seven-times-seven; he was the Central Pillar of All-Glory. He would be obeyed, not questioned. Some obeyed; some did not. But Jose is not fooled; this is Moses Horlick himself."

"And this time you will obey me," the stranger shouted.

Esteban had meant to ask another question, but a woman's hysterical scream stopped him. "The panther!" she cried. "Oooooh!"

"Its claws have sunk into the fawn's neck again," a man shouted. "Look! there's blood."

Esteban turned to Sonora. "That's warning enough, Mia Favorita. This stranger is not welcome in Ciudad de la Paloma."

"What will you do, Esteban?"

He looked about until his eye was met by that of a fair-haired young man. He beckoned, and the young man came hurriedly.

"What do you want, Esteban?"

"Richard, bring Alfred and a dozen others."

Richard hurried away. Soon he was back with more than a dozen young men.

"Esteban," said Amison, "what is your wish?"

"I would have your advice," said Esteban. "What shall we do with this new Moses Horlick?"

"Give him a chance to leave quietly," said Amison.

Esteban looked at the others. They nodded. He looked at Sonora.

"Of course, Esteban," said she. "We have a leader at last—one who will teach us something better than fear. You are our leader, Esteban."

"What is all this whispering?"

shouted the new Horlick. "Silence! I would speak; when I speak, others shall listen. Silence, I say."

People began to crowd around Esteban. What must they do, they asked.

Esteban nodded at Amison. "Put Moses on his horse. If he objects to going north, then let him go south. Only make sure that he goes."

"Did you not hear me?" shouted Nuevo Horlicas. "Be silent, or I will strike you dead."

"We heard you," said Alfred Amison.

"Sure," said his companions.

Alfred said, "We will take you to where there is plenty of silence."

They seized him and lifted him onto his horse.

ALFRED led his horse. His companions gripped their captive's legs. As he was taken away, the stranger shouted curses at the people of La Paloma. "Remember Sodom," he screamed. "Your city will be destroyed, as Sodom was destroyed. From the mountain top I shall watch your smoke and flames; I shall shout in terms of victory. The curse of Sodom be upon you."

There was silence in the crowd, silence until the screams and curses could no longer be heard.

Esteban then mounted the steps of Iglesia de la Curadora Angel. His eyes roved in search of a sigh, of a face that had a benevolent dream in it. He asked, "Is there anyone here who has studied spiritual matters? La Paloma needs someone who understands human hearts, knows how to comfort them."

Then a man of somewhat devout appearance said, "We would hear from Esteban."

Esteban el Sabio removed his hat. "Then let us lift up our faces and give thanks." When all heads were bared, he said, "To the Great Spirit, to Los Dios, to the sun, the sky; to the angels of flowing water and the rain; to the living earth and the wild storm, we pray. To them we give thanks for our deliverance. To them we lift up our hearts, and we shall no longer be afraid. Amen."

Amens rippled and beat like sounds from strings in tune, and a man began to sing. Soon everyone, including children and the ancients, had joined in. Happiness was in every voice; at last Ciudad de la Paloma had become a city without fear.

Lon Williams

author of "City of Fear" also appears in REAL WESTERN STORIES and WESTERN ACTION magazines.

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There was this small company of Union soldiers who had turned renegade; a band of Confederate guerillas; and warpath-minded Piutes. Digger John had to figure some way of getting the three groups fighting each other, in order to save a loyal soldier's honor.

DIGGER JOHN, SCOUT

by A. A. BAKER

DREDGER DAN'S saloon was closed for the night. It's unshuttered windows gazed out glassily; they caught the wavy reflection of Captain Blunt, Army Paymaster, as he dismounted in the Sierra Mountain town of Gold Run. The captain stood a minute to survey the huge building.

"Ssst! That you, Captain?" Dredger Dan reached a stubby arm out of the porch shadows and drew the reluctant captain into the building. The stove spouted a ray of light, throwing shadows across the bar and the gambling equipment.

"In here..." the fat hotel man circled a large lumpy shadow; "here, in the back office."

"What the hell is that?" Captain Blunt drew back. The lump on the floor had rolled over and it was a man. A red-whiskered man with black hair dangling into lazy eyes and the mouth curled in a sleepy smile. A blue bottle fly circled the man's face until he lifted his hand and picked the fly out of the darkness.

"Don't bother that one," grunted Dredger Dan; "come on into my office."

It was a cozy room, cluttered with a safe and an untidy desk. The desk was peeling from the heat of another blazing stove. A lamp, turned up now, outlined the bare ceiling supports. The captain was seated and a glass pushed into his cold hand. He nodded and saluted Dredger Dan with the whiskey.

"Ah, now, Dredger; you're wondering about this night visit?"

"Some. The army generally clanks wherever it goes. Why this hushy meeting?"

"We're moving gold coin," Captain Blunt answered. "A shipment east that's big enough to attract every seccesh gang between California and Washington. We are avoiding the 'clank' as you call it.

"This is a single squad: A sergeant and seven men; three wagons—one with coin, two with black powder. But we need a scout, someone who can get us through the Sierras and across Nevada country. We've heard about a Digger John; he's been recommended as half-wizard, a fourth wolf and the other fourth fighting Grizzly. Can you produce this man?"

"He stalks with the silence of a moth on a feather pillow," Dredger answered solemnly. "In danger he thinks; he

Digger John greeted the officer alcoholically.

don't panic, Captain, he thinks. An' he keeps a secret. His left hand don't know what he's carryin' in his right hand pocket. This Digger..."

"Is he loyal?" interrupted Captain Blunt.

"Fought at Ball's Bluff," recited the hotel man. "Invalided home with a shattered shoulder. General Fremont pinned a medal..."

"He's our man," agreed the officer; "where can we find him?"

"Sit here a minute," the fat man waddled back into the bar room; minutes later he appeared, supporting the limp hulk of the man who had been sleeping next to the barroom stove. "Digger John, want'cha to meet Captain Blunt, U. S. Army."

Dredger Dan led the hulk closer to the desk. Digger shook his head, brought his eyes to a wobbling focus and mumbled, "Yessir, Cap'ain, Sir."

"He'll come around, Captain," the hotel man spoke anxiously; "a few days on the trail will sober him up."

Captain Blunt nodded doubtfully and Dredger Dan grinned with relief.

"The wagons are a half day behind me," the officer said briskly. "He's to report to Saso's squad at Emmigrant Gap and lead them over these mountains and through Nevada. We'll meet them in Salt Lake with a force from the Colorado Militia. Does he understand?" The captain raised his voice. "Does he also understand that confederate guerrillas are ranging east—out

of Missouri and even into Nevada?"

"He will," growled Dredger Dan. "He will if'n I have to raise a lump on his cast-iron head."

IT HAD been a rough crossing. Digger John cursed the officials who had chosen the route over the snow covered Donnor Summit. The wagons, their wheels locked with trace chains, had become dangerous monsters as the squad fought them down over the rocks. The rampant Truckee River was swollen with snow-water, and sprayed the shivering soldiers until their profane comments rang against the bluffs. Then the miles of salty muck across the Carson Sinks—a vast bog where the Humboldt River sank—was a breeding ground of mosquitoes and other trouble. Mutiny.

Digger knew that every soldier was at the breaking point. Since leaving the protection of the Truckee Canyon, they'd been harrassed by a skulking war party of Piutes—murdering devils from Pyramid Lake. Twice the soldiers had been forced to fight driving the Indians back only by superior firepower. But each man knew that this war party was waiting for reinforcements, and was harrying the wagon train to slow it down—waiting for some messenger to carry the news and return with hundreds of Piutes. Then the soldiers' guns would be futile, their lead exhausted; they'd be overwhelmed, scalped and mutilated. And all because of Captain Blunt's stupid plan of expecting a small party to slip through Indian country and full of secesh to boot. That was the basis for mutiny. With a division of the coin, might not each man get free? And the gold would be a fair price for his danger.

They were gathered now, eight blue-clad soldiers, around the weakly smoking fire of soggy greasewood and harrangued by Sergeant Saso. "Why should we bust our guts? Nursin' wagons across this swamp called a desert. No protection from Indians—nothin'. Then Piutes on our trail. Just so's this coin can be used to beat down the south!" Saso turned and directed an angry finger at Digger John. "What'd you get out of it? Fightin' for the North—their Civil War? What'd you get, heh?"

"Wages," Digger answered, knowing this was close to the breakout. He had watched this Saso cottonmouth, the cracker twang of Alabama edging his words.

"An' a bullet in the shoulder at Ball's Bluff? Heh?"

"Yeah, that an' malaria. Why, Saso, what's it to you?"

"I'm gettin' more," shouted Saso. "An' we're all of the same mind." He paused and studied the faces of his squad. "We're takin' these wagons; we're headin' South. There's a town... But, first off, dump your gunbelt!" Saso brought his army carbine up and its black muzzle pressed into Digger's stomach.

"Secesh?" Digger John grunted, dropping the gunbelt.

"Confederate!" shouted Saso. "You can throw in with us, Digger, givin' you a fair split or else..."

"COUNT ME out!" The men jerked around toward a tow-headed soldier.

The men derisively called him Shorty George. He stepped forward and hunched his shoulders—a boy's shoulders bravely clad in the blue army shirt and topped by the yellow kerchief. The lad's face was white under the strain of his decision.

"Gladly," growled Saso without blinking his white salt rimmed eyes; he swung his carbine and fired. The explosion blew the group apart. They backed away, staring, as Shorty George caught the slug in the stomach and was driven off his feet by its force.

Saso crammed another cartridge into the reeking carbine and turned back to Digger John. "You in now or do we count you out, too?"

"Naw..." g r u n t e d Digger and struck out at Saso. He felt his fist land and hoped the crunch of bone meant Saso's jaw had parted. Then he was swinging wildly against the rush of men. His arms were pinned, like a rope net had been looped around him. He was borne to the salt-encrusted ground and saw Saso's boot swing back. Digger knew the skin on his face had parted as his head exploded. He felt the sun follow him into a hole and erupt.

Hours later, Digger John felt his neck jerked back by a heavy hand entangled in his hair. He opened his eyes to a pair of butternut clad knees and raised his head to peer up.

The man was cuffing Digger's face. A tall man in a buckskin shirt with tassles dripping from its grease-stained sleeves. They were inside a building. A large shadowy room with a dozen figures moving restlessly behind his tormentor.

"Wake up, Jocko..."

"Awright, Bucko," Digger growled, "let loose my hair..."

"Well, he's finally come to." It was the growl of command, a sort of irritated, whimpering voice. "Now we'll find out somethin'."

"Where am I?" Digger stalled.

"*That's* information?" ranted the voice. "All right, Jocko, you're in Blue Water Wells. We brung you in from Carson Sinks—rode you in gently on a Union wagon. A wagon loaded with gunpowder. That was last night. There was a dead soldier, a bluebelly soldier where we found you and the wagon. You been out like a light till right now." He paused importantly. "I'm Colonel Buck Ranger."

"Secesh?"

"What'd you think, Jocko? 'Cept we don't use secesh—we're fightin' for the South!"

The colonel lowered his tall form and brought his hook nose close to Digger. One eye was a yellowish brown, the other eye was glass. And, blown into the glass where the pupil belonged, floated a confederate flag, the stars and bars!

Digger glared, nodded and tried to rise.

"We want information!" said the guerilla colonel. He slapped a bony hand across Digger's face, opening the crusted wound from Sergeant Saso's boot. "Where's them other two wagons headed? What the hell happened out there? How come the blubelly soldier was kilt and you was left for the butcher birds?"

Digger began to understand—that whispering, ferocious undertone. This man, Colonel Buck Ranger, was half afraid his orders would somehow fall flat. This man talked and acted tough, but wasn't at all sure of himself.

"S'long story, Colonel, sir, but I ain't tellin' it to no Confederate guerillas. Now go away and leave me be!" Digger gambled on resistence, sensing that somehow he had to find a bargaining point.

"String him up!" The colonel's glass eye popped. "String him by his heels! Buck'n gag him! We'll teach the Jocko to jump when a colonel of the chivalry passes orders."

DIGGER FELT his back scrape the floor as his feet were snatched and raised; a loop circled his ankles and he was hoisted upward. The ceiling joices creaked against his weight. A short stick was jammed through his elbows and his wrists were tied across his waist. He dangled like a chicken hung for bleeding. A bar towel was forced between his teeth and fastened. The knot dug into the back of his ridged neck. Digger fought the hot pain of suffocation until he could wrench his neck around and clear the towel from his nostrils.

There Digger John swung. This Blue Water Wells must be the Nevada headquarters for the secesh, this was the place Sergeant Saso had hoped to reach. Here he could throw in with the Confederates. But why had this colonel

been so prying about the whereabouts of the two missing wagons? Had Sergeant Saso decided to head for some other guerilla hideout? Or more likely, was he headed toward Mexico, with the gold to be divided among the seven deserters? And why hadn't this glass-eyed guerilla chief taken off after the wagons?

Now Digger's hatred was directed in two directions. He owed Saso a bullet for his mistreatment and for the death of poor, brave Shorty George. The boy had taken oath to serve the Union, and died in the Nevada wastes because he had honored his oath; Digger vowed Saso plenty for that.

And the tab was being added, too, by this guerilla, Ranger. A tab already carrying certain murders and carnage in the name of the Confederacy. And now responsible for the dangling position in which Digger found himself.

It was strange—two groups of men committing depredations toward himself and others with one excuse; to free the glorious south! And Shorty George dead...

"When you're ready to talk..." It was the odd scratchy whimper of Colonel Buck Rangers. "When you're ready, nod your head and we'll let you down."

Digger John glared, trying to capture a steady look into the colonel's misfit eyes. Then, reluctantly, he nodded. The gag was removed and the guerilla members gathered close, their sweaty bodies tense.

"You brung in Shorty's body?" Digger had trouble keeping his tongue from dropping down against the roof of his mouth.

"Yeah. He's laid out in the backroom but..."

"He's dead?"

"Yeah, he's dead!" shouted the colonel.

"Sure?"

"Gut-shot, sure he's dead."

"Then why didn't you bury him out on the Sinks?" asked Digger.

"Look, Jocko, we want to know what them wagons were carryin', and we want to know where they're headed."

"Whyn't you follow the wheel tracks?"

"We was," a gruff voice answered from the back of the group, "them Shoshones drove us off."

"If you'd only knowed what them wagons carried!" Digger tried to chuckle, but the air caught in his sore throat and he gagged. "It'd taken a million Indians to scare you off."

"Powder was in one," gritted Colonel Ranger. "What was on the other two? And how come you was knocked out and the other soldier kilt?"

"One question at a time, Colonel; an' another thing—loose me off this rope or I ain't sayin' no more."

DIGGER STOOD dizzily. His head throbbed as the blood recovered its channel; he felt his pounding heart slow down. He was on the path of something here—a path that could bring revenge for Shorty George, and could send this brutal Colonel Buck Ranger into more hell than he'd ever been in before.

Digger breathed deep and searched for the idea. Two groups of men, seven deserters with a wagonload of coin—Union coin—needed in the east. Captain Blunt and his Colorado Volunteers waiting with escort at Salt Lake. Sergeant Saso, who'd blasted the life out of Shorty, and this Colonel of the Confederacy with his cutthroat band of guerillas. And now the Shoshones—or were they Piutes?—a marauding tribe scouring this desert land on the warpath. This made three murdering kegs of powder loose on the Nevada wastelands.

Somehow, Digger John had to provide the match. What would happen at a cock fight? If three fighting birds were thrown into the pit at the same time?

"Come on, Jocko," the colonel was impatient.

"I want to see that soldier's body!" snapped Digger. "Alone!"

"Then you'll explain?"

"Sure," growled Digger. "I'll tell you what the third wagon carried. Hell, I'll tell you that right now." He paused until the eager shuffle of feet quieted then spoke in a half secretive whisper. "That third wagon was loaded. spring deep, with coin. Gold coin, with Union escort waiting in Salt Lake City."

"And only a squad?" snapped the colonel. "Think we're stupid? Even the Union army ain't that dumb." The colonel's voice trembled with a furious impatience.

Now I've got him, reasoned Digger. *He's afraid to believe the truth, yet greedy with the thought that there might be a wagon load of coin under protection of a seven-man squad.*

"Well, Colonel, don't forget I told you. Hell, it's better them Shoshones get the coin, they ain't on either side in this war."

Digger threw a look around into the hungry faces of the colonel's men.

"Course you don't want to believe what I said, them Shoshones is mighty tough customers." He held his disgust tight in his throat as he gave praise to Saso and his deserters. "'Ceptin' them seven Union soldiers ain't afraid, they're trekin' right along, headin' for Salt Lake. You call them blue-bellies, what'd you think they call you? Here you got maybe twenty men, an' more guns an' knives hooked onto each man than a skunk has fleas. Does that gold stomach scarf turn yellow in a fight?"

"Maybe it's better," Digger rushed on, jamming the needle deeper into the touchy pride of the guerillas, "that you don't believe me about the coin. But I told you. Now, let me see Shorty George's body—*and I said alone!*"

Colonel Ranger's face was flushed with torment, he tugged fretfully at his belt sash. The saloon was tight with indecision. The guerilla chief knew a decision was expected. Should he take his men out—to risk everything, maybe even ambush by the Shoshones? Should he do it on the word of this Union scout? And his followers: Would they consider him a coward if he hesitated?

Digger sensed it was time to make a move; he stepped close to the colonel, and pushed his battered face forward. "While you're gulpin' down what I said, show me where that soldier's body is." He knew he'd have to goad these guerillas into action by producing some startling act that would send them after Saso's wagons. They were safe here, and still unwilling to be sucked out into the maw of the desert unless...

"H'it's there..." a lanky guerilla growled, then spat a stream of tobacco close to the colonel's polished boots. "There in the back room all laid out purty. You must be like my ol' granny. She was never happier than at a purty weddin' or layin' out a corpse. Get on with it; we got to do some jawin' here with Colonel Buck Ranger."

DIGGER JOHN stepped past the colonel, his breath tight in his throat, expecting the colonel to demand an explanation of Shorty George's death. He elbowed his way through the rebels into the back room. It was a cold room, reeking of spilled whiskey and chewed cigar butts. Shorty George's body was laid out on the round poker table, his booted legs dangling. His broad-brimmed hat was askew over the now leaden face. The bloodstain had worked from his waist down over the yellow stripe on his blue pants. Digger John felt a weighted sadness, remembering the taut face as the lad had stood up to Sergeant Saso.

But he couldn't afford to waste time. Turning to a shelf stuffed with bar towels and gambling equipment, Digger lifted down a lamp and hefted it until the kerosene sloshed. He upended a stained spittoon and got to work.

The lamp, propped under the bot-

tom of the spittoon, soon had the room reeking of hot metal. Digger dug several gold coins from his pocket and watched them bubble as they melted. Then he tipped the molten gold out into a bullet mold fashioned from the tin slot used to stack the poker chips. Digger finally straightened his back and stared down at the golden slug. This would pass for the greedy eyes of the colonel.

And now for the ghoulish part. He sucked his lungs full and, with a sympathetic pat against Shorty George's shoulder, Digger loosened the shirt and tied a pair of bar towels together into a rough bandage. This he wrapped tightly around the stomach so the bandage would show; then Digger hoisted the body to his shoulder and clambered out the window.

His luck held. A stout roan, already saddled, stood patiently alongside the building. Digger hoisted the body into the saddle of the skittish horse and tied it firmly upright. Digger returned through the window for the lamp. Outside again, he wet another towel with kerosene and laid it along the building a full foot from the horse. He screwed the wick holder loose and draped the towel end into the half lamp base then stood back and whistled softly through his teeth. When that lamp exploded, the horse would make tracks. If only his primitive explosive would work, once the towel wick reached the kerosene. The horse, with Shorty's body, had to be seen escaping out of Blue Water Wells!

Digger climbed back through the window. He was as ready as he could ever be. He removed the chair from under the door knob and noisily stepped back into the bar room.

A heated argument was going on. Men were standing around the largest poker table, bending forward as each clamored to be heard. Facing his men, Colonel Buck Ranger spotted Digger and moved close. "Now that you've seen him, tell us the rest," he demanded. "How was he killed? And why were you busted up?"

"Yeah, Colonel—'ceptin' Shorty wasn't killed. He's mighty low but he's alive. See? This slug was all that was botherin' Shorty; I probed it outa his back. It hit front center but caught his rib and come out under the skin in back. You figured he was dead but he was playin' possum onc't he found out you was seesh."

DIGGER TOSSED the golden slug onto the green, felt-covered table. It rolled, glinting evilly under the overhanging lamps.

A short breathless silence followed as the men stared at the slug. Then a voice blurted. "It's real gold! A carbine slug made outa gold coin!"

"Explain this immediately!" shouted Colonel Buck Ranger. The colonel had his navy colt out.

"No, Bucko," chuckled Digger, "pull that trigger an' you'll never know. But it's fairly simple—even for you rebs. We was attacked by them Indians. Anyways, they was only about twelve of them Indians. We was low on lead, after a full afternoon of running fight so we moulded them slugs outa the coin we was cartin' along. We drove the Indians off, killin' most. Then—well..." Digger hesitated, dropping his eyes guiltily. "Well, me an' Shorty George, in there, we figured we'd..."

"You wanted to loot the rest of the coin!" shouted Colonel Ranger. "An' that soldier was plugged. You were overcome and both left for dead!" The man was frantically gleeful, his glass eye dodging from man to man as he pressed his point. The tiny Confederate flag seemed to be waving as he chortled, *"Then it was a small party of Indians!"*

The guerilla chief hit the table with his hand. "With wagons, they can't make time," a man shouted, "we can overhaul them!"

"What about me and Shorty George?" blurted Digger, praying his

kerosene triggered bomb would explode. "Can we come in? The army'll hang us on Sergeant Saso's say-so, and..." He had to keep talking, kill time, until that lamp exploded. To galvanize the colonel into action. To get these raiders out on the desert before Saso's squad escaped.

Then it came. A whish, like the powder from a broken firecracker, the sharp whinny of the frightened roan, followed by the thud of galloping feet drew the rebels to the front. The roan clattered by with Shorty George's limp body, the bar towel a white flag in the dusk, racing down the road like a ghostly horseman and disappearing in the direction of Humboldt Sinks. A courier speeding to warn the Union soldiers who protected the gold.

"Saddle up!" Colonel Ranger flailed his arms, "he'll warn them!"

"What about me?" Digger shouted belligerently, catching the officer's arm and whirling him around. "Do I go?" Then he added hurriedly, "I can take you across country. Maybe..."

"We ought to kill you right now," gritted Colonel Ranger.

"Don't talk like a kid!" shouted Digger. "I'm in as deep. Hell, if one of them soldiers get into Salt Lake, my name's mud. Maybe Shorty don't care, but I ain't gonna be hung without a fight!"

"All right," rasped the Colonel. "Get a rifle, get some sidearms and saddle a horse—but, for the love of heaven, *will* you shut up!"

IT WAS A full half hour before the skittish horses could be rounded up and saddled. The anxious rebels glared into the darkness, knowing the wounded soldier might arrive at the wagons, that the Union Men could be ready—dug in.

"Don't try to follow him," Digger loped up. He'd found a razor-backed pinto with a mean cast in one eye. "I laid out their wagon route, an' they'll follow it—'cause they don't know this country. If we cut across Black Rock Ridge there, we can come up on the wagons afore Shorty gets around the base... Damn this horse!"

Digger reined the dancing animal around and struck out toward the towering ridge. The colonel yelped and with the rebel pack strung out behind him, raced after the scout.

Galloping ahead, Digger felt ugly and mean. He pictured the roan tiring and bucking at the dead weight of the soldier's body. Somewhere out there in the night, Shorty George was playing his unknowing part in this drama of revenge—revenge against Sergeant Saso's deserters, which might include this loot-hungry pack led by Colonel Buck Ranger.

It was morning before they drew the tired horses abreast on the eastern slope of Black Rock Ridge. Far below, a dark mass against the white crusted salt flats, they could make out Sergeant Saso's squad.

"There's only one wagon." Colonel Ranger talked with his eye to the pocket telescope. "And that'n's broke down. Appears like they've a wheel broken. They've a fire going—squatting there around it..."

"Then Shorty ain't arrived yet," grunted Digger, "else they'd be throwin' up lumps an' diggin' in to fight, hey?"

"The canvas is burnt off," the colonel worriedly added.

"Happened before," lied Digger quickly, "back on the Truckee we was attacked by Piutes."

The colonel nodded, but Digger knew Saso'd met up again with the Indians. He'd beaten off the war party again, and was now repairing the damage; most likely he had lost the second wagon in the fight. Furtively, Digger scanned the horizon. Where was the third fighting cock? This deal should include three groups of varmints: Saso's squad, the colonel's rebels, and them hell-for-murder Piutes.

The desert, its swales shaded yet by

the dawning sun, was a vast, silent maw of morose danger. It seemed just waiting to gobble the evil as well as the brave. Digger John hoped coincidence would give nature a chance to vent its spleen of the marauding gangs.

"Well, let's get down there," he spoke loudly. "We cut down below them an' charge up that draw..."

"*I'll* give the orders," shouted the colonel.

" 'Ceptin' if you don't stop shouting, both of you," growled a grizzled rebel drawing a soggy cigar from his thin mouth, "them soldiers is gonna hear you and we'll never surprise nobody."

"Advance!" The colonel's order was hushed. "We'll come up that draw, walking our horses; charge the last hundred yards."

THE REBELS moved out. Digger followed, subdued and gloomy now. His plan, ripened back at Blue Water Wells to somehow bring this guerilla band, Saso's squad and the Piutes together, had failed. These secesh would override Saso's deserters; the gold would merely pass into new hands, and might find its way into the deep south. But at least Sergeant Saso would get his—a bullet from his own kind.

An hour passed, and they were in the ravine. Each man moving carefully afoot, leading the tired horses; ahead, concealed by shoulder-high sage, the voices of Saso's mutineers carried lightly to the guerillas.

Digger suddenly mounted. He glared down at the startled faces of the guerillas. The colonel raised his carbine. Trigger back, he whispered frantically. "Get off that horse!"

"Go to hell!" Digger stage-whispered right back. "I'm leavin'." He reined his horse around, each dislodged stone a rolling crack of noisy doom to the breathless men.

"Don't shoot," growled the cigar-chewing man; "let the crazy galoot

go. Let's get on afore they catch wise."

Trembling in rage, the colonel faced around then, with a wave, directed his men to mount. The Colonel spurred his own horse forward tagged by suddenly yelling, cursing men. They passed the sage clump as the roar of gunfire broke. It flowed back, bounced off the ravine and drummed in Digger's ears. He felt no sympathy for Saso's men; they had done that when they killed Shorty George. He only hoped they could cut down some of the guerillas.

Digger spurred the wall-eyed pinto into a gallop and rode into the Nevada wastelands.

Digger John never remembered how long he rode. But it was still morning when he broke over a cobbled ridge and came upon the ambush of the Piutes. They were facing west, each man lolling along the swales of the road from the west. Far ahead on the point a savage sat motionless, staring, waiting.

Here was his third fighting cock; and back there, behind by miles, the colonel's guerillas had beaten the Piutes to the wagons. Anger struck Digger like a sudden jab of a spear in an open wound. He raised in his saddle and jammed the spurs to the pinto. He drew his pistols and with a shouted war whoop, raced his horse down the road.

Startled, the Indians turned and watched him thunder down the wagon tracks. He fired as he passed, pouring lead into the bushes and each slug seemed followed by a screamed curse.

Then he had passed and was approaching the bewildered scout. The man turned and was trying desperately to control a skittish horse. Digger rode in close, raised his carbine and struck the man off his horse; then with a yell of derision, he raced on—hoping he could remember the ravine where the guerillas had charged Saso's men.

The Indians' horses were fresh, and the wall-eyed pinto had had a long night's ride; but it was game. The horse took each flat turn of the road with a thudding spirit that brought a lump into Digger John's throat. But the Piutes were gaining, had begun to yelp and kiyi.

Then Digger topped a rise and a yell of triumph rose in his own throat. Just ahead, a plodding wagon—its broken wheel replaced by a short pole—was being jerked along by a band of bloodstained guerillas. Colonel Buck Ranger, his sash looped into a sling that held his wounded arm, turned wearily in his saddle.

He saw the charging Digger John and his glass eye seemed to snap; then he sat open-mouthed as Digger reined his horse off. The rebels turned in a body and were caught flatfooted as the Indians slammed into them. The crack of rifles and the screams of dying men carried over the sodden arid waste and broke against Digger's back as he raced his horse away. Saso's men were dead; the guerillas would never see the gold they had raided. They'd be dead men on a stretch of salt and rock and sage. The blind eye of Colonel Buck Ranger would catch the glint of noonday sun, the stars and bars would glare blindly into that sun.

Digger John turned east, there were many miles to Salt Lake City. Captain Blunt could hunt down the Piutes and recover the coin; that was a job the army could handle. Digger had had his revenge. Somewhere back there, Shorty George's blue-uniformed body would be found; somehow, that seemed important.

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Test your cow-country savvy with these teasers!

1. Which of the following wild animals are you not likely to see in Yellowstone Park: mule deer, peccary, bear, jaguar, elk, wolverine?
2. What year was it, that the Texas longhorns began moving northward in large numbers?
3. What is the cattleman's most cherished possession?
4. What does the cow-term "held," mean?
5. A sheepherder's job is one of the most harrowing jobs in the world. It is one of the world's oldest professions. It is a year-around, 24-hour a day job. In the spring and summer there is the menace of noxious weeds. Can you name four of them that are death to sheep?
6. Who was the first person to homestead in the United States, under the Homestead Act of 1862?
7. One oldtime cowman said to another: "I started my herd with nothin' but a brandin' iron." What did the oldtimer mean?
8. Where was the first telegraph station located in Arizona?
9. What does a cowpuncher mean when he says he "heeled the calves?"
10. True or False? In the range country there are many unwritten laws of conduct. For instance no person of the West will eat in a sheep camp or chuckwagon without washing his own dishes afterwards; nor will he ride through a gate and leave it open so that valuable stock can stray.
11. What is a "road brand" in cow-country language?
12. What does the cowboy term "riding point," mean?
13. What noted gunfighter was so well educated and spoke such good English that he was often regarded as a "sissy" on the frontier, to persons not knowing who he was?
14. What is a kack?
15. What become of John Chisum's ranch, one of the largest cattle spreads the West ever knew?
16. Can you name two oldtime cattle trails, and tell where they started and where they ended?
17. Name three Western states that lead in the production of gold?
18. Can you name three oldtime cow-towns in the West?
19. The most important possession of the cowboy, his partner in every detail of work, is what?
20. For what purpose is a barrel sometimes used in a rodeo arena?

(Answers on page 98)

Thundermouth Jones had made quite a hit with his grand-nephew, telling him wild and wooly fabrications of what Jones had done in his younger days. And now — he had to live up to his boasts!

BLOWHARD GUNHAND

by DAVE WILSON

THUNDERMOUTH JONES threw the last shovelful of gravel up on the wagon. Then he leaned on his long-handled shovel, a dried-up man of sixty—wiry and scrawny. His lean jaws worked diligently as he chewed his tobacco. "Hot work, Tommy."

Ragged, barefooted, Tommy was seven, and big for his age. He looked up at his uncle and grinned boyishly. "T'ain't near as hot as the day you kotched the three bandits out on the desert, remember? The time you kotched them three outlaws that head stuck up an Arizony bank."

Thundermouth nodded. Maybe he shouldn't have told so many wild tales to Tommy; sometimes "windies" had a way of backfiring. But he had, by his

big mouth, built himself up as a hero in his nephew's eyes. Now he decided to live up to his rep. "Nope, not near that hot, Tommy."

Tommy grinned. He spat on his hands the way Thundermouth always spat on his palms when he pitched hay or handled a gravel shovel.

"Tell me about that fight again, huh?"

"Ain't got time, Tommy; we'd best hurry this gravel into town an' get it spread out."

They were hauling gravel for the alley back of the Wells Fargo Express building, four miles away in Riffle Block. Not much money in hauling gravel, but they needed a stake to go out prospecting. The diggings weren't so rich now on the North Yuba, but Thundermouth had made his boast that *he* could find a good claim.

He was determined that Tommy would have his chance to attend school with good clothes, shoes, and everything else needed. And Tommy would also go to school this fall, before he got too big to go into the first class with boys a whole lot smaller than he. With good luck he'd get Tommy to high school after Tommy had finished the Riffle Block school.

"Ouch!"

Thundermouth grabbed his aching back. He wanted to cuss out loud, but he didn't; Tommy might catch on to the habit—as it was, his good-natured windies, tall tales he had manufactured, were enough for the boy to digest at his age. And sometimes he wished he had not fabricated so much to the boy. All in good humor and good nature, but still—

"You're gettin' old, Unc. Reckon it'll be up to me right soon to take care of you; your bandit-catchin' days are over."

"You hush up, you young upstart!"

Tommy rammed his shovel into the load, climbed up by bracing himself on the rump of Firebox, the off-mule. Firebox laid back his ears and got ready to kick. Dishface, the other mule, looked around, ears also back, wanting to get into trouble, too.

Both mules were always on the prod. Many times Thundermouth swore he'd never seen such ornery critters before—always wanting to run away, and kick the single-trees to pieces.

"Stan' still, you danged long-eared jassax!"

Tommy sawed back on the lines. "I'll hold 'em down, Unc."

Thundermouth climbed on the load, carefully taking his time. Last winter he had dropped in on his nephew, Abe, and he found Abe and his missus down sick with smallpox, over on the Feather river. Abe and Mary had died. Thundermouth had promised to take care of Tommy. The chore had had its drawbacks...and lighter moments.

ALTHOUGH he'd worked hard, Thundermouth had never accumulated anything. But Tommy picked up things real quick—too quick, sometimes— and the boy wasn't afraid of work, which was good.

Thundermouth forgot, and spat tobacco juice on Dishface's rump. The mule's rump rose, and his ears went back; but before he could kick Tommy had hit him with a pebble.

"Hit them collars!" Thundermouth ordered.

The mules went out, pulling the loaded gravel-wagon at a trot, despite the weight. But the incline slowed them to a walk. Thundermouth sat on the seat, Tommy beside him, and for once the old man was silent.

"We oughta catch us some bandits," Tommy finally said. "They'd be a reward on them, an' we could go prospectin' right off, Thundermouth."

"What bandits could we catch?" Thundermouth decided to humor the boy. Also, it made conversation.

"Two bandits held up the bank over to Rapid Gorge," Tommy pointed out.

"That's only forty miles away, Unc. Heck, you rode almost a hundred miles, you told me, before you caught them bandits over in Utah."

Thundermouth almost winced. From now on, he told himself, he'd tell no more windies—Tommy was getting too big, and too smart. "That was over in Colorado," he corrected.

"Don't reckon you could catch a bandit now," Tommy opined.

"Why not?"

"You're too old—"

"Too old! Why, you young whipper-snapper, insultin' your ol' unc this way! I oughta get off this wagon an' paddle the daylights— What in the hades?"

Thundermouth stared, big mouth open. Tommy's eyes were as wide as saucers, for a man had come out of the brush ahead of them about ten feet. He was a skinny man, and he held a rifle on them. "Hold up them mules!" he ordered.

Thundermouth sawed back on the lines, and Dishface reared, wanting to strike. The man moved back hurriedly. "Tough mules, huh? Well, ol' timer, don't reach for that rifle there on the back of that load, savvy. 'Cause my partner has it already."

"Man behind us," Tommy gasped.

The second man had caught onto the wagon's endgate, climbed up and crossed the gravel. Now his rifle was in Thundermouth's back, the barrel digging and very uncomfortable.

"Go easy on that trigger!" Thundermouth pleaded. Tommy glanced at him, and the old man read the boy's surprise; evidently he had not expected this of his brave uncle.

Mingled with this fear was another thought, and it hurt almost as much as the rifle, digging into his back. People considered him a harmless, broken-down old windjammer, and that's why he had told Tommy so many fibs—he didn't want the only person he had ever loved to look upon him with unfavorable eyes. Now he made his voice level.

"What the tophet you two gents want? We ain't got no money 'cept a few cents. We're poor people, an' we're haulin' this gravel in behin' the Wells Fargo building, an' we ain't even gettin' paid until this load an' some others is dumped."

"We don't want your money." The man on the ground spoke; "we just want this kid, savvy."

Tommy tried to pull back, but he was too slow. A hard hand grabbed his wrist, pulled him bodily to the ground. Fear was a living thing in the kid's eyes as he looked back at Thundermouth, lips twitching to keep from crying.

"Help me, Thundermouth!"

The boy's frightened plea registered on the old man, giving him a strange calmness. "I'll do somethin' soon, younker. But first, I wanna know what this is all about, men."

The rifle left his back. The man behind him—a short, heavy-set gent—made a short, ugly laugh. "He'll do somethin', Will! That's a good one, huh? Why, you ol' helpless ol' man, I oughta bend this rifle—"

"Don't hit him, Will," the tall man said. "He's goin' help us rob the express office." His laugh was also short.

THUNDERMOUTH'S mind was working. Two bandits, and both called the other Will; he remembered hearing that the two outlaws that had robbed the Rapid Gorge bank had called each other Will. One had been tall, while the other had been short and stocky.

There was irony here, also. Tommy had wished for some bandits to catch, and now the two bandits were here; but instead of him and Tommy catching them, the bandits had them in their grip.

"I'm gonna do—what?" Thundermouth asked.

"Drive ahead," the man on the

ground ordered. "Will, you ride behind him, I'll carry their rifle. See if the old man's got a side-arm on him."

Fingers came in from behind, searched Thundermouth Jones, left him. "No Colt, Will."

"Get these mules movin'," the tall man ordered.

Thundermouth's fingers trembled on the lines as he clucked to his mules. Firebox lashed out a hind leg, but the tall man jumped to one side, his face dark with anger.

"I'll kill that mule—"

"Hold your temper, Will; bring the hosses along. I'll make this old gent drive up to his shack; we'll unload the kid first, an' you hold him there, huh?"

"Good deal, Will."

Tommy asked, "Unc, think of somethin', an' help me!"

"You keep your head," Thundermouth warned.

The short man squatted behind him on the gravel, rifle on him. The tall man took Tommy into the brush, the boy yowling and kicking; soon he rode out on one horse, Tommy ahead of him in the saddle, and he led another horse—evidently the saddler of the short bandit.

By now, Tommy was quiet, and Thundermouth knew the boy was putting all his faith into his uncle. Thundermouth tried to gather his scattered thoughts. One thought stood out: these men evidently planned to rob the Wells Fargo Station down in Riffle Block. And they would use him as an accomplice.

But where did Tommy come in? He saw his side in this—for days now, he'd driven in behind the building, unloaded his gravel, then driven out. Now one of these bandits—or both of them—would ride in on his load. And when he stopped behind the Wells Fargo building—

But where did Tommy fit in?

Then suddenly he had it. One of the bandits would hold Tommy as a hostage, while the other went into Riffle Block with Thundermouth Jones. With Tommy living under the threat of death, Thundermouth could do nothing in the way of notifying the law, or turning the tables himself. He would just have to play along with the two bandits.

The scheme, he saw, was logical and strong. His bottom lip trembled, and his knuckles were white on his reins. They came into the yard and yonder sat Thundermouth's cabin, an abandoned mining-shack he and Tommy had moved into because there had been no rent.

The pup came out, barking, and Firebox reared, front-hoofs lashing out. The dog slid away and went under the porch. Dishface wanted to kick, but Thundermouth held the team, see-sawing them down.

"Rough mules," the short man said from behind him.

"They hear a rattlesnake buzz, an' off they want to run," Thundermouth said; "they'll stampede any time when they hears a rattler."

"They won't stampede today," the bandit said surlily. "I'll see to that, 'cause it won't take much for me to run a bullet through you, old man."

THE TALL man had dismounted, and now he stood on the ground, still holding Tommy, one arm bent at an angle behind the boy's back. All he had to do was put on a little pressure and Tommy would holler in pain.

"You an' this ol' coot go into town now, Will," the tall man said. "I'll hide our broncs in the brush an' keep this kid here. There'll only be one man in that office, an' if he doesn't open the safe, kill him an' try your luck at it." He laughed shortly. "You've sprung a few safes open in your days, Will."

"That safe is as good as robbed," the short man said.

Tommy said, "Uncle Thundermouth—" Then the tall man twisted, and the boy's words ended in fear and

pain. Thundermouth swallowed, hatred welling up in him, but he kept silent.

He understood now. These two had been around Riffle Block; they had scouted the Wells Fargo office, had seen him hauling in gravel, and had decided to use him to get into town, and hold Tommy as a hostage as to his, Thundermouth's, good behavior. He realized he would have to play ball with them.

"Be good, Tommy," was all he could say.

The short man said, "Turn these jassaxes toward town, ol' man. How far be she into Riffle Block?"

"About two miles, or so."

"Watch that kid, Will."

The tall man had hidden the two saddle-horses in the brush. "I sure will, Will," he said. He picked up Tommy and carried him inside the old sway-backed cabin. The kid didn't say anything, but the look he flashed at Thundermouth made the old man's throat tighten.

For it had been a look of great confidence. It had said, "You've been in worse deals than this, Uncle Thunder, an' you can come out on top. You've told me about worse setups than this you worked outa."

Yes, but fictitious setups, thought Thundermouth, cursing himself for filling the kid up with such wild windies.

The gravel-wagon creaked along. The short man got on the seat beside Thundermouth, rifle in front of him. "You go into town an' dump your load, savvy? Then you go to the livery-barn and buy some baled hay. Then you put it in your wagon, leavin' a hollow place in the middle, an' then you drive again, an' I jump in an' hide behind that hay."

Thundermouth nodded. These two had overlooked nothing.

"You savvy that, old man?"

Thundermouth nodded. "Only one thing wrong, fella. I ain't got no money to buy no more bale hay; the livery-barn man won't give me none on credit, either."

The man grinned, dug into his pocket, came out with a gold-piece. "Here's some dinero for the hay. Now dump your load, get the hay, and be sure and be there—'cause if you ain't your kid—"

He didn't finish; he didn't need to. Fear for Tommy's safety was a live, ugly thing, coiled in Thundermouth's scrawny breast. He would have to play along with these bandits until Tommy was safe. And then?

"Whoa up there, you danged mule!"

A rattlesnake had *burred,* off in the brush. Dishface was on his hind legs, pawing the neckyoke, and Firebox had started kicking, hind legs beating a tattoo against the single-tree.

"Straighten them out!" The short man's voice held fear. "We're right next to this canyon—"

Thundermouth jerked, and finally got the mules out of their fright. He settled on the seat and was silent. Will growled something and settled back, too; Thundermouth tried to think.

These mules were deadly afraid of a rattler. Many times he made the sound of a rattlesnake's rattling just to scare the team for Tommy's benefit. He had imitated a rattlesnake so much he could do it perfectly.

But he didn't tell this to the short man.

He wondered how the short man would go about making this robbery. Would Will ride into town with him? He doubted that. They met nobody on the rutted, rough road. A short distance from Riffle Block, the short man dropped to the ground.

"I follow this crick up from here. Play your cards close to your belly an' keep your mouth shut. I see you next when you drive past the back of the Wells Fargo depot."

"I'll—I'll be there."

"You'd better be, ol' man, or that kid'll suffer."

THUNDERMOUTH saw the man slip into the high brush, and then the bandit was gone. He wished he had a gun—either a rifle or six-shooter. But, he didn't have a gun... And besides, there was Tommy.

He dumped his load, seeing nothing of the short bandit. Then he drove to the livery-barn and ordered eight bales of hay.

"You got any money, Thundermouth?" The livery-barn man glared at him.

"Got the money, you o'nery son."

"The gold piece twinkled, and a grimy paw caught it. "Well, I'll be danged; dinero grow on buckbrush out your way?"

Thundermouth was in no mood to jest with the man. Firebox stomped at a fly, and he hollered, "Whoa up, you o'nery jassax!"

"Them mules still o'nery, huh?"

"They'll die that way," Thundermouth assured.

The man pushed up the bales and Thundermouth placed them properly. Two across the end, one on the other; two on each side, one on the other; two on the other side, and there was a space inside just right for a man to hide in. He wished he could tell the man about the bandits and how one of them held Tommy. But he didn't dare. Tommy was in danger. After he had Tommy back, then he'd get the sheriff.

Then came an ugly, terrifying thought.

These men were killers. Gunmen. They'd shot and almost killed a cashier up at Rapid Gorge, so he had heard. Maybe they didn't intend to have him and Tommy spread an alarm, after they were gone.

That thought was cold and, although it held danger for himself, this personal danger was outshadowed by the danger menacing Tommy. He was an old gent, and he'd lived his years—but Tommy...

The thought grew, became terrifying. Deliberately he shelved it and built up his calmness. He drove up the alley, presumably heading for home, and he met the town-marshal, cutting across a vacant lot.

"Catch any robbers lately, Thundermouth?"

Thundermouth reddened under his tan, for the marshal was plainly making fun of him. Again came the thought: *Should I tell this fellow about the predicament Tommy and I are in?*

No, he couldn't do that; disclosing such information might bring about Tommy's death.

"Close your big mouth, Ab."

The marshal laughed and headed for a saloon. The town was quiet and a dog came out, low and nipping at Dishface's hind legs. Dishface kicked, caught the mutt, and the dog ran off, yelping in pain. For the first time in what seemed days, Thundermouth smiled.

But that smile was short-lived. For, when he was behind the Wells Fargo station, the short bandit ran out, carrying a small sack. He threw the sack in among the bails, vaulted up, and settled behind Thundermouth, the hay hiding him.

"Easy job," the man chuckled. "That gink saw my gun an' he sure opened that safe. I slugged him, rolled him into the cellar, locked the front door. The catch closed on the back door as I slammed it."

Thundermouth had heard the catch slide home. A passerby come along and he'd figure the clerk had stepped out, locking both doors. It would be some time before the dim-witted marshal would discover the office had been looted.

Thundermouth glanced up and down the alley, but nobody moved on the dirty strip. Nobody had seen the bandit leap into his wagon and hide behind the hay.

"Make them mules hit a joggin' trot, ol' man." The voice came from the hay behind him and it was low and

freighted with danger. "Tell me when we leave town, so's I can look up. You kept that big mouth of your'n buttoned when you got this hay, didn't you?"

"I'm no danged fool."

A chuckle, low and ominus. "That's the kinda langwidge I like to hear. Good, straight words like them, ol' man. You know, it's a funny thing, but after a man's killed another man, he can kill the second an' third an' fourth and forgit about them right off."

THUNDERMOUTH almost shuddered. But he hid his consternation beneath a seamed, silent face, and he chewed on his eatin' tobacco, trying to mask his nervousness. He wished this were over with. Right now, money for heading out prospecting didn't mean much, if anything. The main thing was to get Tommy out of danger.

But still, if he could prove to the boy he was not a liar... That thought played around his brain. A dangerous thought, that might lead to his death, if he carried it out.

"Git along, Dishface."

The mules hit a sullen trot. When called upon for speed, they were so contrary they did not want to deliver. But try to hold them to a walk when they wanted to run away! They jogged, and the top row of hay-bales moved a little, wobbling back and forth. Thundermouth could feel the movement of the top bail next to him, for he sat directly against it.

"Outa town yet, ol' man?"

"Not yet."

"Then get some speed outa these ol' mules, huh?"

"Don't wanta drive too fast." Thundermouth r e m i n d e d; "people might get suspicious."

The whole thing revolved around one item: Was Tommy still alive? Maybe the tall bandit had— Thundermouth had to stop thinking of that. If they harmed Tommy—even just harmed him—he'd trail them and—

"We're in the timber now," he told the bandit.

The man stood up, leaning on the top bail directly behind Thundermouth. He had braced his rifle against the hay-bales outlining the enclosure. Thundermouth glanced at him and noticed he sported a wide smile.

"We did that slick," the bandit said. "Nobody seen me enter that office, an' nobody seen me leave. Now we'll pay you an' the kid off, an' make tracks outa this country; an' nobody'll know but Will an' me how that office got robbed."

Thundermouth opened his mouth, clipped his jaw shut. His suspicions had been correct; they intended to do away with both himself and Tommy—nobody would be left alive behind to tell about the robbery.

"You—aim to kill us?"

"Nothin' like that," the bandit was scoffing. "How come you get such a bad thought, ol' man? A coupla peaceful, law-abiding citizens like us—"

There was nothing Thundermouth could say. He fought for his thoughts, corralled them. They came to the cut along the canyon, and Dishface shied in, making out he was afraid of the cut. Thundermouth jerked on the other rein, and Firebox, catching the fever, started fighting his bit.

"Straighten them out!" the bandit hollered.

The wagon weaved, one front wheel close to the lip of the canyon. Now that the moment had arrived, Thundermouth found himself calm. His danger was great, but he was doomed anyway—and doomed by the outlaw's own admission.

Dishface kicked, Firbox reared. Thundermouth hauled back on the reins, and the bandit, reaching ahead, tried to grab the ribbons. Then Thundermouth's tongue snaked out, wet his lips.

He made the sound then—the quick, rattling burr of a rattlesnake. Long

practice had given him the exact sound. The mules had been wild, but now they broke; they lunged ahead.

"Hold 'em!"

DIMLY THE words registered. *Now or never,* Thundermouth thought, and he accordingly acted. Fast action, faster than he figured his old muscles could show, and it was decisive action.

He braced his legs on the foot-board, and pushed with all the strength of his scrawny legs. The spring-seat, a precarious perch at its best, went over backwards, carrying him with it. He lost the reins.

He felt his back hit hay, and the bales slid under his weight. They pinned the bandit back, and he grabbed for his rifle. But Thundermouth, on his back, rocking on the load, saw the rifle first.

He grabbed it.

The bandit's hands came in, and he missed. Holding the rifle by the barrel, Thundermouth swung it, and the stock whammed the bandit on the side of his head. Thundermouth heard him holler, and then the man went overboard.

The mules were enjoying their runaway. Wheels hit rocks, bounced, and four bales of hay slid out, pounding down into the canyon. But Thundermouth Jones had no eyes for the hay; his plan had worked, and he had a rifle.

He hit the ground, jouncing out of the wagon just as he was ready to jump. He landed on his back, a boulder driving his wind from him. He got to his feet, gasping for air, sick inside. He could see the bandit, a dim line against his uncertain vision.

The man lay on his belly, there in the road. He had his six-shooter, the barrel across his forearm for good sighting. Dust pounded and rose beside Thundermouth; Thundermouth jerked up the rifle.

One thing was definitely in his favor. The distance was too far for accurate sixgun work. Besides, the bandit had fallen—and fallen hard. Therefore he was likely to be shaken up some.

But that, also, was true in Thundermouth's own case. He sucked in air, lungs tortured, and the rifle butt socked into the curve of his shoulder. All his life he had been a good rifle shot, for on many a quick shot had rested his next meal when he pulled up on a deer or grouse. And that speed aided him now.

He caught the front sight, let it slip into the notch of the rear. He caught his target, and this was all one gesture. He seemed terribly slow; the hammer fell, the stock moved back.

The bandit screamed. He got to his feet, hollering, "Don't shoot—don't shoot!" He tried to hold his feet, but he couldn't. Thundermouth saw him drop his gun. Then the man went down, twenty feet from his fallen weapon.

Behind him, Thundermouth heard a crash. Sounded like a wagon smashing into timber. Well, by now the mules would have the wagon ripped up pretty bad. He ran ahead, hobbling as fast as he could. He came to the bandit's pistol, kicked it to one side. He heard it land on rocks below as it fell down the cliff.

Hope speared through him. Now, if he could get to Tommy—get Tommy away from the tall man— Yes, if Tommy were still alive. He thought, *"I can't think of that,"* and he knelt beside the bandit.

The man lay on his back, arms flung out. Heart beating like a mule kicking at the single-tree, Thundermouth knelt. The man looked dead. Anyway, he was bad wounded; he wouldn't travel far, if he did make his feet— And that was only a dim possibility.

Thundermouth got up, automatically putting a new cartridge into his barrel. He snapped the lever up and turned, heading up the trail. He was about half-

a-mile from his cabin. Had the tall man heard the shooting?

He couldn't help but hear the roar.

That thought was a hot iron that stabbed through him. If the tall bandit figured something had gone wrong—and how else could he figure—how would Tommy fare? Maybe he shouldn't have started this ruckus.

Then came a comforting, swift thought. The short bandit, by his own admission, had admitted Tommy and he would die. Now the short bandit lay in the middle of road, out of this deadly game. That thought gave him confidence.

One thing also was certain. If they pulled through this—and they had to come out alive—Tommy would never josh his Uncle Thundermouth again, for Uncle Thundermouth was delivering the mail on time. That was a good thought, a firm thought.

SOMETHING hit him in the left shoulder.

The blow came from above, from up in the pines. He thought at first a boulder had been thrown at him, then he heard the savage crackle of a rifle. A man was up there, hidden in the brush, and that man had shot him.

The rifleman, he knew, was the tall outlaw; couldn't be anyone else, he reckoned. The rifle-ball knocked him to his knees. Another bullet fell short, showering him with gravel.

He still held his own rifle. He lunged for the brush, and he heard the rifle talk again. He never knew where that bullet went; the buckbrush came out and seemed to gather him in. Wild rose-bushes tore at his clothing. His left arm hung limp, and he felt a warm fluid on his ribs.

He had to act fast, he knew. He was sick from shock, and he went ahead, working through the brush as only an experienced deer-hunter can work. He had to get the man! There was a chance Tommy was still alive. He had to get the man so he couldn't get back to where Tommy was, if he was living.

He came to a small clearing, not more than forty feet across. He hunkered, fighting to keep his head clear. He saw a bush move, and raised his rifle, the gesture tearing his left arm. But he never got to fire.

From the ledge above, a good-sized boulder made a sharp arc. Thundermouth saw it coming, and judged it would land close to the spot where he had seen the movement. Another boulder was thrown down.

He couldn't see the thrower, for the brush was too thick; but he knew that Tommy was alive. He heard a man yell as a rock landed on him. The man ran into the clearing, heading for Thundermouth.

He was running out, trying to get out far enough so he could see who was on the ledge. He ran backwards across the clearing, crouched over his rifle. Thundermouth moved along the brush, and the man almost backed into him.

The rifle came up, came down; then Thundermouth grinned and cupped his

good hand to his mouth. "We got him, Tommy."

Tommy slid in the shale, freckles moving under his grin. "He tied me. Uncle Thundermouth, but I got out—my hands is smaller than my wrists, you know. Hey, you—you got shot?"

Thundermouth sat on the unconscious bandit. "Not much," he said, trying to make his voice strong. "Just my shoulder busted, I reckon. Mebbe it ain't busted. But first, get this gink's belt, tie his hands tight."

A few minutes later, the outlaw stumbling ahead, they went back to the wagon-road. Tommy had tied Thundermouth's dirty shirt around his uncle's shoulder, and the old man was grinning, despite his pain.

"There's the wagon, Unc."

The mules had tangled up in the buckbrush and Firebox was down, the reins tangled around his legs. They got him untangled and the team stood silent, their wildness gone for the moment. Tommy got on the seat, turned the wagon around, and Thundermouth made the bandit crawl into the box.

"We'll ride back here, Tommy."

"Keep your rifle on him, Unc."

The other man was dead. That hurt Thundermouth, and he tried to keep it from his face. They got him into the wagon and Tommy gigged the mules toward Riffle Block, with Thundermouth in the back with the tied bandit and the dead man.

Tommy spat, imitating Thundermouth when he chewed tobacco. "We shore done kotched a outlaw, Unc," the kid declared. "Now we git rewards an' we head out for some prospectin', eh?"

"We sure will."

Tommy looked back, face split by a wide grin. "I'll take back what I said about you bein' an ol' codger, Unc. You caught these bandits jest as easy as you kotched them over in Colorado years back."

"Not Colorado," Thundermouth corrected; "Utah."

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Ron Morey had one unconquerable fear, and Spade Malone played on it for all it was worth.

POWDERSMOKE REDEMPTION

by CLEVE CURRAN

EB LINK whipped a fast left at Ron Morey's jaw, and missed; and the next thing he heard was the raucous jeers of the half dozen or so skirt-shy cowpokes decorating the bunks of the Ninety-seven bunkhouse.

This was the night of the Rodeo which Pop Turner and his daughter, June, put on each year to celebrate the beginning of the dude season, and Eb and Ron had got to scuffling in the bathhouse and had put on the gloves to settle it.

Don't get me wrong. Eb and Ron were friends; sidekicks. You may have heard of Eb; he was a pug. A good one, too; or so they said. He was still good. Good enough to be cock-o'-the-walk in any ordinary bunkhouse.

Well, Ron was kneeling over Eb almost before he hit the floor. "I'm sorry, Eb. I didn't mean— You all right, keed?"

Eb sat up and laid the heel of his glove against his jaw and pushed it careful. The jaw waggled and Eb nodded. "I reckon so. All in one piece, anyway.... Dog-gone you, Ron! In spite

of all I've taught you, you will leave yourself wide open for a left hook—and every time I try to land one and cure you of it, you land that right! It just ain't right!"

Pop Turner chuckled. "Make up yo' mind, Eb! Either it is a right, or it ain't one. Whichever it is, it's poison, ain't it? ...Y'know, Ron after seein' that fancy shootin' act you done this afternoon, and seein' you battle Eb here this evenin', it's plumb surprisin' to me that a man with yo' gifts—"

He stopped talking suddenly and his face got red, as if he'd choked on Ron Morey's reputation. What he'd started out to say, and what everybody listening knew he'd started to say, was, "It's plumb surprisin' that you'd let Spade Malone make a doormat out o' you!"

Which was exactly what a lot of folks were wondering. Ron Morey had been there in the Twin Rivers country for ten years or better, and folks liked him. He was big, and he was a likable cuss, and he could do a man's work afoot or a-horseback, and nobody stopped to figure whether he was a fighting man or not because he'd never had any trouble. Some men draw trouble the way a sorghum-can draws flies. Others go through life without ever a riffle, yet nobody that knows them ever doubts their courage. You just figure if trouble happened to hit them they'd face it, and you let it go at that.

It was that way with Ron...until Spade Malone got there. It seems those two had known each other as kids, and Spade no sooner laid eyes on Ron than he started riding him. Did it deliberate, Spade did; and did it mean. And Ron took it.

Well, you know how things like that take hold. Folks saw Spade bearing down on Ron, and Ron sidestepping him, and they got to thinking how Ron had sidestepped other times. Before, they'd figured Ron just wasn't quarrelsome and was willing to let his head save his knuckles. Now, they began to wonder if maybe Spade was right.

Ron could toss bottles into the air and bust them with a sixgun; and he could lick Eb Link with the gloves on—but could he fight barefisted, and did he have the guts to sling lead at a target that could shoot back at him? That was what folks were asking, and the more Spade rode him the nearer they came to arriving at an answer.

POP TURNER coughed. "Humph! ...Well... I better go. Dance's been goin' most an hour and if I ain't there t' call them square-dances June'll scalp me.... Well—so-long..."

He ducked, and made his getaway. The rest of the bunch followed him, and that left Ron and Eb to dress by their lonesomes. And Eb was sore.

He said, "He's right, at that! It beats all hell how a man like you lets a loud-mouthed four-flusher like Malone bluff him! It ain't a lack o' guts, Ron; I know that. I thought it was, at first—until that mornin' you snapped that rattler out o' my blankets by the tail, and you barehanded.... What is it, anyway, you jughead?"

"Maybe I'm just livin' up to my rep, Eb. Like Spade says." Ron was under the shower now—they had those things at the Ninety-seven now that it was a dude ranch—and his voice was sort of muffled. Eb looked at him, but Ron's eyes were closed and his face was all screwed up and Eb couldn't tell whether it was on account of the water being cold, or what. "Give a dog a bad name. you know..."

"Horse-feathers!" Eb said disgustedly. "Don't be a fool!"

But maybe Ron was right, at that.

Ron finished dressing finally and stepped outside. It was dark there in the shadow of the bunkhouse and Ron leaned back against the 'dobe wall, rolling a cigaret. The main house yonder was brilliant with lights, swarming with people, noisy with music and

laughter and the rhythmic shuffle of dancing feet.

Pop Turner had hated the idea of turning his outfit into a dude ranch; swore he'd never give up cows to "ride wet-nurse on a bunch o' city slickers!" But June had persuaded him, and the profits of the experiment were lifting the Ninety-seven out of dangerous proximity to red ink.

A girl in a short white coat and a man in black came past the corner of the main house and strolled toward the horse corral, and Ron's right hand, poised to strike the match for his smoke, halted. The girl was June Turner.

He couldn't see her face against the light, but he recognized her wrap.... And the man—was Spade Malone. There was no question about that. Spade's left knee was slightly stiff from a bullet wound acquired in a gambling brawl. And Ron could see that this man limped.

June Turner and Spade Malone!

It was generally known that the man who gave Spade his limp would have been justified if he had more nearly centered his target. Spade was that kind of a gambler.... And there was talk, too, of woman-trouble back of the gambling quarrel. Something about the loser's wife.... He was the loser, too; more ways than one. Spade was a finished gambler in a school where the .45 was better than Hoyle, and the man who knicked him was dying with Spade's slug in his chest when he drove his own bullet into Spade's knee.

And June! Strange that she'd fall for such a man! Malone was handsome, yes; but he was mean. Cruel. Given to sudden, insane rage. Angered, the man was dangerous; as dangerous as the ugly wolfish dog he had for a pet...

The couple halted at the corner of the horse corral and Ron could hear their voices in a low intermingling murmur. He stood in the shadow, unconscious of his eavesdropping until it was too late.... The girl's white coat stood out with painful clarity against the dark, so that every move she made was clear. She leaned toward the man, lifting a face that was a ghostly blur in the moonlight, her white sleeves raised, circling Malone, pulling him down to take her kiss.... Ron turned, tip-toeing silently toward the barns.

It was an hour later when Ron Morey joined the crowd in the main house and he was still sick and strangely numb. He knew what he had seen, and he knew what it meant. June was not a girl who gave her favors lightly.... And she had given them. She had gone into Spade's arms willingly, and more than willingly....

POP TURNER spoke to him as he entered the house and Ron nodded without actually hearing Turner's words. He said, "I'm leavin', Pop. Feel sort of—whipped. Ridin' this afternoon, and all.... Tell June—"

"Why not speak for yourself, John Alden?"

Ron turned slowly, unwillingly, to meet June Turner's level eyes. There was laughter there, and open friendliness. But Ron said woodenly, "I've got to go. Sorry..."

"But Ron! You haven't danced with me! You can't go without dancing with your hostess!..."

SHE STOPPED, looking beyond him at the crowd. Ron was suddenly aware of silence. He was turning even as Malone spoke to him. Malone stood facing him, his hands hidden behind him, grinning. Back of Malone the crowd stood motionless, all eyes upon the group there in the doorway.

"I've got a little present for you, Morey," Malone said softly. "I've been tellin' the folks about your nickname—the one we called you back in school. 'Kitty' Morey. They wondered why we called you that. I'm—showin' 'em!"

His hands came forward suddenly,

swinging a cat. He tossed it straight at Morey's face.

Ron heard a voice—his own—jagged and horrible. The cat brushed past his face and dropped to his shoulder, its claws digging. He struck at it—flung it aside. It fell, hissing, back arched, its hair on end. He kicked at it.

A wave of laughter hit him like an icy wave. He turned blindly, head bowed, and lurched outside. Behind him, he heard Malone's voice lifting above the crowd's laughter. "'Kitty' Morey! You see, folks? It fits! Kitty—Morey!"

In the deep shadow beside the bunkhouse wall Ron found a bench and sank down on it, shivering with a reaction that was like a chill. He knew, tonight, what hell was like! Seeing June Turner in Spade Malone's arms ...and now—this! Before them all! Before June, and June's friends! And his friends, too; his neighbors....

They'd laugh at him; despise him. They couldn't understand a thing like this; they couldn't know the awfulness of a sick, mad fear you couldn't fight, couldn't control. It wasn't as if he hadn't tried to control it; to reason against it. Time and again he'd thought he'd licked it....

He didn't hear June until she spoke to him, and he turned, startled. "I'm sorry, Ron...Dad tried to warn you. I didn't know.... Would it help to—talk about it?"

She sat down close to him and Ron saw that she was wearing that same coat. He hated it! Except for it, he might not have recognized her a while ago; might not have known.... Not that it made any difference, now...!

"I'm just—what Spade said I was, June. Talking won't cure it."

"But Ron—! It didn't hurt you, really. It couldn't have! It was only a kitten...."

"Sure! Only a kitten! Harmless as a kitten! That's—funny! ...All I know is, once when I was little I picked up a cat and I must've hurt it some way because it struck at me; ripped my face wide open. Mother went crazy for a minute; thought I was blinded. Maybe it was her fear that did it; I don't know.... Only, ever since then, I've been afraid of cats! Deathly afraid!...

"The kids at school found out, and made life hell for me. I'd fight 'em, and then somebody'd toss a cat at me—and I'd run! I've never been in a fight since—a real one—that I haven't been licked because I was expecting to throw a cat in my face! ....I'm—yellow!"

"Don't be silly, Ron! Yellow—you? Look, Ron; I saw you ride the Mad Hatter right after he'd killed Tony Marlowe. Nobody can tell me you're yellow! You've got a—a phobia...."

"Whatever you call it, it's—hell!"

"I know; but—if you'd force yourself to fight it...make yourself fight it—"

He stood up suddenly. "Sure! All it needs is—guts! Guts enough to make myself beat it! Sure; that's right! Only—I haven't got 'em! I've tried.... And tonight, when that cat came at me, I went crazy! You can't fight a thing when you're crazy with fear, June; when you can't control yourself...."

He wheeled, striding away from her. Later, she heard the hammer of his horse's hoofs....

THERE WAS little talking among the men who gathered for breakfast at Morey's Circle Six table next morning. Those who had been to the dance kept silent because they felt the grouch of a sleepless night, for one thing; but that was only a part of the reason. Talk must inevitably swing to the subject of what had happened last night; and they liked Ron. His shame was theirs.

Even Ron's foreman, hard-bitten veteran, was willing to overlook a fault in a man he liked. Coming home from the dance last night, he'd said,

"There's a streak in every man, I reckon, you take the trouble t' find it. Me, I'm scared t' death o' frawgs! Some folks eat 'em! But they give me the shivers."

Ron, too, had spent a sleepless night in spite of his early departure from the dance. And—he had reached a conclusion. It was not an easy conclusion to reach, nor a happy one; but it was made. He'd sell his spread; clear out; start, fresh somewhere.

The Circle Six had been worth a nice sum when he bought it, and was worth more now; enough to set him up in the cattle business elsewhere. It would be easier, he thought, to live where he'd not be seeing June Turner. Easier to live where, for a while at least, the men he'd meet wouldn't be hiding—or not hiding—their sneering laughter....

THE TOWN of Tecumseh, twenty miles westward from the Circle Six, sweltered under the white heat of the early summer afternoon when Ron rode into it, and the gray dust of the street spurted up like smoke about his horse's hoofs. A buckboard stood in front of the hotel and a collie dog under it was panting even in the shade.

In the shaded sanctuary of the hotel porch, men sat tilted far back in easy chairs, torpid with heat. One figure there caught Morey's eye and he reined his buckskin to the hitching rail and dismounted. Pop Turner spoke as Ron came up the steps.

"Hi, Ron. Hot, eh?... June dragged me into town, durn her.... Sit down, Ron; take a load off yo' feet."

Ron nodded. "Storm brewin', I reckon. ...Pop, I want to sell the Circle Six. I rode in, figurin' to list it with Parsons; but I saw you, and I thought you might be interested. I'll make you a price, if you want it...."

Pop Turner removed his boots from the porch rail and let his chair down carefully. Beyond that rail, swift shadows fell across the dusty street and a sullen rumble of thunder sent a faint tremor through the buildings.

"Look, Ron," Pop Turner said. "Don't be a fool! This thing—this thing that's troublin' you—it ain't as bad as you're imaginin' it! ...You're jokin', Ron!"

"I'm serious, Pop."

A second peal of thunder rolled toward them swiftly and burst, just overhead, and Ron glanced up at seething, churning, jet-black clouds. Rain spattered blackly on the dusty walk and a horse snorted loudly as the cold drops stung him.

Ron said, "My mind's made up. You want the spread?"

Pop shrugged. "Well, now.... O' course I want it, Ron. But—lord! I'd have to think it over some..."

Southward along the street a screen door slammed and a girl in a pongee shirt and tan whipcord riding breeches came briskly past the corner of a store, her high-heeled boots making a quick rhythm on the plank walk. It was June. Pop Turner saw her past Ron Morey's shoulder and felt a thrill of pride in her. Ron had not turned.

"O' course, if you're sellin', the logical thing is fo' met' buy; I see that. Wouldn't want just any Tom-Dick-or-Harry borderin' my range... But—hell...!"

June's footsteps, nearer, filled the pause. Turner's face froze. "Good god-a'mighty, Ron—look there!"

Ron wheeled. June, turning toward the hotel steps, smiled up at him. And back of her a great black dog came loping straight across the dusty street, head swinging low, jaws slavering...

THE COLLIE dozing uner the buckboard yonder stood up to make a friendly overture and the black one slashed at him viciously, without a sound. The collie's yelp had the ring of deadly terror in it. His hackles rose. He turned, and ran.

"Mad dog!"

Pop Turner's yell followed the instant knowledge in Ron's own mind. He's never seen a dog gone mad before but—this was it! Spade Malone's dog—big, surly devil—mad! He'd heard somewhere that mad dogs fear water. Perhaps it was true; perhaps the dog was running from the rain.

June reached the steps and Turner yelled at her. But it was Ron who leaped and caught her arms and flung her into Turner's hands. And, as he leaped, he swept his Stetson off his head, making a glove of it.

The hat, with Ron's left fist behind it, drove out straight into foam-flecked jaws; for the dog had leaped without a pause, growling. The slaver from his jaws stained June's short skirt.

Ron's blow went to the throat, hurling the beast aside and down. As he fell, the dog snapped sideways, like a wolf, his poison teeth ripping the felt of Morey's hat. A gun barked heavily and Turner found time to wonder how Ron had managed to draw so swiftly. One shot—the red flame licking down into a tawny chest—and that was all.

Ron turned slowly, wiping the slaver from his hand... And Turner saw that that hand was clean; unmarked. The dog had missed! Pop gulped, seeking for words. Ron sheathed his gun.

The hotel door burst outward suddenly under the impact of a hard-driven shoulder and Ron's eyes lifted instantly, traveling past Turner. Pop saw Ron's lips draw thin and tight.

Malone stood just outside that door, crouched low, his elbows bent. He wasn't handsome now, at all. His face was flushed and oddly twisted; and his eyes were red—like the dog's eyes had been when he leaped...

"You killed him!" Malone's voice was low, rasping, as if the words choked him. "Killed him t' get even with me for last night! Afraid t' tackle me—you killed my dog!"

"It wasn't that. The dog was mad!"

"You lie!"

It was insane of course; yet it was real. Malone's right hand struck down, jerking his gun. Ron saw the deadly purpose in Malone's red eyes.

Pop Turner velled.

Ron lunged straight out, shooting his fist to Spade's jaw. His left shot home. The quick spat-spat of fists on flesh was sharp and clear. Malone went back a pace, head rolling under jolting blows. He fell...and Ron stood over him. Pop Turner knelt and snatched Spade's gun ..

It struck Ron suddenly that he was not afraid! Waiting for Spade to rise again, he knew a poignant hunger for more battle! He hoped desperately that Spade would rise! All fear was lost, this time, in the wild savage thrill of fighting; of solid blows well-targeted. He thought, "Maybe I've never been this mad before!" And was amused...

Malone stayed where he fell. He'd had enough.

Boots thudded heavily along the walk and Ron turned to face a growing crowd. A dozen men had materialized out of nowhere to stand staring, their voices making a little curious din. They were wet, most of them. The rain was falling now in a steady downpour.

THE VOICES were still of a sudden and Ron faced Spade Malone again. Malone was on his feet at last, weaving, his thick lips mashed into a bloody smear. "You just—postponed it, Ron! ...Turner—gi'me my gun!"

Pop shook his head. "Not now. I'll leave it at the hotel desk. You can get it when I'm gone."

A muscle alongside Spade's mouth twitched nervously. He scowled, but he nodded. "Ron," he said softly, "When I get my gun—I'm comin' after you! If you're a man—you'll wait for me!"

He glanced down then at the body of his dog lying there in the eave-drip. There was silence around him as he

turned and walked down the steps and away down the street; and there was silence afterward while two men lifted the dog, and carried it to the end of the porch and dropped it over the rail, out of sight. The crowd was waiting, watching Ron.

Ron saw, instead, bright moonlight on a girl's white coat; two figures, man and girl, standing beside a horse-corral. The girl's arms lifted hungrily. She raised her lips... She loved the man. No doubt of that; no earthly doubt of it.

In a little while now, that man would come hunting for Ron Morey. Ron could meet him, talk to him in gun-smoke—or leave the country. He wasn't afraid to meet Malone. He'd met him once today, and beaten him. He could again. He knew that certainly, and the thought of doing it brought no fear with it. And yet—he could not, either. Not when it meant what it would mean—to June!

No; he would leave. That's what the town expected him to do. It wouldn't surprise anyone that a man afraid of a kitten should be afraid of Malone... And yet—it was harder, somehow, to pretend to fear than it had been to mask it! If he faced Malone today there would be no fear in him again, ever. He knew that, without knowing how he knew it.... But if he ran—

Pop Turner said, "Thanks, son. That was a nervy thing. I'm thankin' you. He would've had June, sure."

Ron shrugged. "It was safe enough" he said slowly. "I covered my hand with my hat."

"Yeah? And his teeth tore through the hat like it was paper! If he'd gone an eighth of an inch deeper—"

Ron grinned. "Maybe if I'd thought of that I wouldn't have done it."

"Maybe you wouldn't," Pop said softly; but there was no conviction in his tone. "Anyway, I'm thankin' you.... And it ain't over, Ron. Malone meant what he said to you. You ain't forgettin' that, are you?"

Ron said, "I'm not forgettin' it. I'm —leavin' town."

One of the men on the porch laughed oddly and turned. One by one, the others followed him, filing in through the hotel door and through the lobby to the bar. Someone said, harshly, "See? What'd I tell yuh? A flash in the pan; that's all. Acted without thinkin'. Now that he's had time t' think—"

The roar of rain on the tin roof and the hard crash of the thunder shut off those sounds and June said, "Ron."

Ron turned. She stood between him and the steps. She said, "You've whipped your fear... That's true, Ron; isn't it?"

He shrugged. "It doesn't look that way, does it? You heard what I said..."

"But you weren't afraid a while ago; not of the dog, nor of Malone! I watched you, Ron, I saw your eyes. I know!... Why don't you meet him, Ron?"

Ron stared at her. "You mean—? You mean, you want me to—? ...I'd kill him, June. I'm faster with a gun than Spade..."

"I know..."

"But—June! I thought—I thought you loved him! I saw you—in his arms —last night!"

Her head jerked up. "Last night? You're crazy, Ron!.. What did you see?"

He told her, spilling words in one swift rush that faltered oddly as he saw the sudden gleam of laughter in her eyes. "But, Ron! That wasn't me! Silly! You should've known!"

"Not you? But, June—the coat!"

"I loaned the coat to Betty Duane—one of my dudes! The little fool! I didn't know she'd set her cap for Spade; I'll take to her..."

A SHEET of flame broke blindingly around them then and the crash

of the thunder was like an explosion. June screamed and came straight into Ron's encircling arms.

She was laughing, but there was a trace of hysteria in her laughter and Ron held her, his big hands soothing her. She said, "You see? I'm scared of something, too! I've got a phobia... I'm terrified when lightning bangs like that! I've always been!"

Ron's laughter rolled in time with hers, deep in his throat. "We'll make a pair, then won't we, June? You scared of thunder, me, of cats!"

Something b r u s h e d lightly past Ron's leg. He felt it dimly through his riding boot. It came again...

June stirred and looked down suddenly. Ron bent his head to brush her hair.

She pulled away from him. "Look, Ron!" And waited, watching him.

He looked, following her pointing finger. A great black cat, back arched, leaned on his boot and purred, rubbing herself full length. He stood there, watching her. She turned, winding herself between his feet again.

He raised his eyes. They met June's questioning gaze, and met it steadily. There was no panic in him now; no fear. He said, "I'm not afraid of it! See, June? I'm—not—afraid of it!"

She nodded happily. "I see. It's over, Ron.... You won't even have to fight Malone to beat it; you've beaten it already.."

Ron laughed. His laughter had a rich exultant ring in it. "I'll meet him, though!" he said. "I'll take the cat—and stuff it down his doggoned throat! I'll make him eat it, fur and all!"

★

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KNOW YOUR WEST

by HAROLD GLUCK

Peace With Pride

Here's a short-short story with one deliberate error in it. See if you can spot it.

JOHN BUTLER had never been the kind of a man to try to conceal his thoughts or opinions. Perhaps it was the terrifically powerful body that nature had given him as a present which in turn created a confidence in himself. Or it might have been his New England heritage of letting the words fall where they may. He pounded his fist on the old oaken table in Frank Moran's office.

"If I didn't know you better, Frank," he half-shouted, "I would say you had sold out to the XL outfit. What's gotten into you? A quarter of a century ago we both fought Chief Black Cloud for this land. Our blood bought it and we built it up. Now they tell me you are advising the ranchers to accept whatever terms Fred Beach offers us. Over my dead body he'll get my land."

"Then it *will* be over your dead body," snapped back the thin man seated on the other side of the desk in his combination law offices and printing establishment. "Sure, we fought Black Cloud for the land. The only trouble happens to be is that he and his tribe had no legal right to the land. And you can't even claim squatter's rights. For according to the state constitution you can have no such standing as against the sovereign power of the state. It was the state which gave Fred Beach the grant of land in turn for his deal to build a new state capitol; you just try some shooting, and he'll have the Rangers out here to enforce the law."

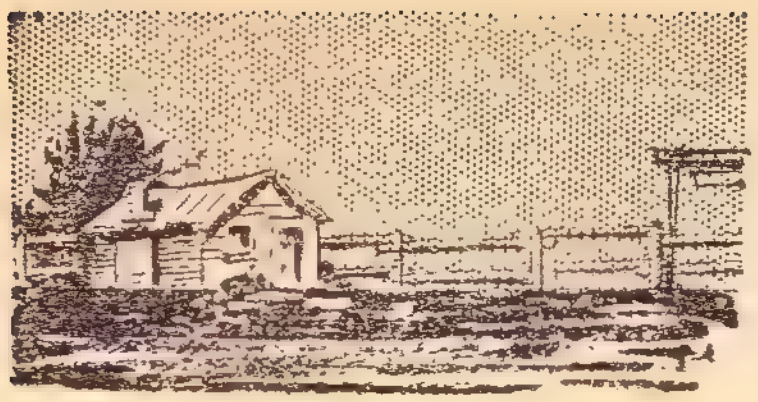
John Butler's face was now turning completely red. He bit his lips to prevent the language he was about to hurl from being uttered. For his memory did inform him that Frank Moran had once saved his life. John Butler had been attacked by an infuriated steer and in another second would have been fatally gored. Frank Moran had flung himself from the saddle of his horse upon the animal's horns. He fought and wrestled the mad brute to the earth. That could never be forgotten.

"There must be something that can be done," he finally said. "Tomorrow morning we are holding a meeting outside of my place. The tempers are rising."

"Whatever can be done can't be accomplished with rifles and sixshooters," warned Frank Moran. "We no longer live in a West where bullets make law and justice. Maybe it is an ironical thought, but just as we shoved our orders down the redskin's throat, we are getting a dose of it ourselves. Maybe I am at that stage of life when I can do a bit of reflecting. The days of Jack Hays and his Rangers are part of our past; you can settle nothing by shooting it out except to decrease the population."

THE SUN was just above the horizon as the first of the small ranchers appeared on John Butler's place. Before eleven thay had all gathered outside. There was only one woman who wasn't a wife nor a rancher. Jane Kelton, now in her sixties, had made her money as a Jack-Whacker. In the boom days of gold and silver mining, she had brought sorely-needed supplies to many a grateful camp. When it came to anything that smelled like a fight, you couldn't keep Jane out of it.

"Wild Bill Hickok should be here



now," she was telling the assembled men in her high-pitched voice. "I remember when he fought the McCandlas boys, back in '61 at the Rock Creek station. He and Doc Mills didn't care a hoot about the odds; maybe we got water in our veins instead of blood. But if there is any fighting to do, just count me in on it."

To emphasize her words, the gray haired woman took from her holster a cap-and-ball pistol and waved it in the air. The men cheered her for five minutes and then got down to the business of the day.

Mike Perley spoke his mind. "They're a-goin' put up barb wired fences! That XL outfit is grabbin' all our land. No more free range for our stock. And they be tellin' us our land isn't ours. Know what that means? We kin hand over our stock fur free to that XL bandits. I'll shoot every head with my own hands before I so it."

John Butler was going to speak next when suddenly he noticed two riders coming closer and closer. All eyes turned in that direction.

"What gall!" uttered Jane Kelton. "Look at them, John; your daughter Helen with the Beach spawn, Joe."

Either unaware or totally ignoring the hostile glances, Joe Beach continued riding at the side of Helen Butler. Then they dismounted and both faced John Butler.

"You get out of here pronto," ordered John Butler. "And if you don't then you'll get a dose of lead."

"That's no way to speak to my husband," chided Helen. "We were married this morning. Preacher Thompson hitched us both up. You promised me a big wedding party; do I get it?"

There was an awkward silence as the implication of what Helen Butler now Helen Beach sank into the minds of all present. It took a woman to rescue things. A big smile appeared on the face of Jane Kelton as she spoke.

"What kind of folks are we? Business can wait till later. We got western hospitality to show right now. Look at all the food piled up. So we turn this into a wedding party. I'm the first to congratulate the lucky lady. Get right in back of me you men and kiss the bride."

THAT BROKE the ice. Hardened faces smiled and Helen looked knowingly at her new husband. Family difficulties weren't going to interfere. And hour later two other riders came to join the party. John Butler couldn't believe his eyes when he saw Frank Moran and Fred Beach together. They came over to him and the three went inside by themselves for some time.

When they returned John Butler held up his hand and there was quiet. "Frank Moran has figured out a way in which we can all be satisfied. He says he is going to transfer a big stretch of land he owns south of the river to Fred Beach. In return, we can all stay on our property and keep it. But *if* we sell it, then we must sell it to Fred Beach; if we die, he gets title to it. Means as long as we live here we own it. Comes the spring roundup we can all make extra money helping the XL ranch. And first call for foremen on that ranch will be from among us."

There were no longer any tempers among the crowd. Without emotion they could now think straight and clearly. Fred Beach could enforce his rights by law and strip them of everything. True, they would always feel indebted to Frank Moran, but he was one of them and they could work out their gratitude in their own way. They gave their assent and were contented.

"That strip of land will help me a

lot," explained Fred Beach. "Funny thing about Longhorns. Got no attachment to their native soil. You'd think that when Texas steers grazed the ranges of Montana they would hanker to return to our sunny Nueces country. Or when they escaped along the trails they would back track to their original stamping grounds. I am going to use that strip of land as a control point for all my foremen to meet and make plans."

The next celebration was when Helen Beach's firstborn was a son and everybody turned out for a day of festivities and fussings.

But in a corner of his large library room, Fred Beach smiled at Frank Moran. "I guess nobody will ever know that strip of land originally belonged to me. I transferred it to you and with it we got peace. But it was peace with pride. Dificult, but we did it."

Question: Can you spot the error in this story? (The answer is on page 75)

IT AIMED TO PLEASE

Special Feature by Bess Ritter

WITHIN a period of two years a church in Kilgore, Texas certainly went through a considerable number of changes.

It was built in the early 1880's by the Baptists, who used it for worship every Sunday. Then an oil boom was reported and people flocked into Kilgore from all parts of the Union. Since there certainly weren't sufficient lodgings for even half the newcomers, some of them got the idea of sleeping in the church, and using it as a shelter.

Pretty soon more and more people began to follow suit, until the inevitable happened. Fights for bed space, and later on for floor space on which to lie down, grew so frequent and violent that the Texas Rangers were called in by both town and church authorities.

This may have stopped the fighting in the building itself, but it certainly continued in other parts of town; the little local jail couldn't possibly accommodate the many trouble makers that had to be arrested.

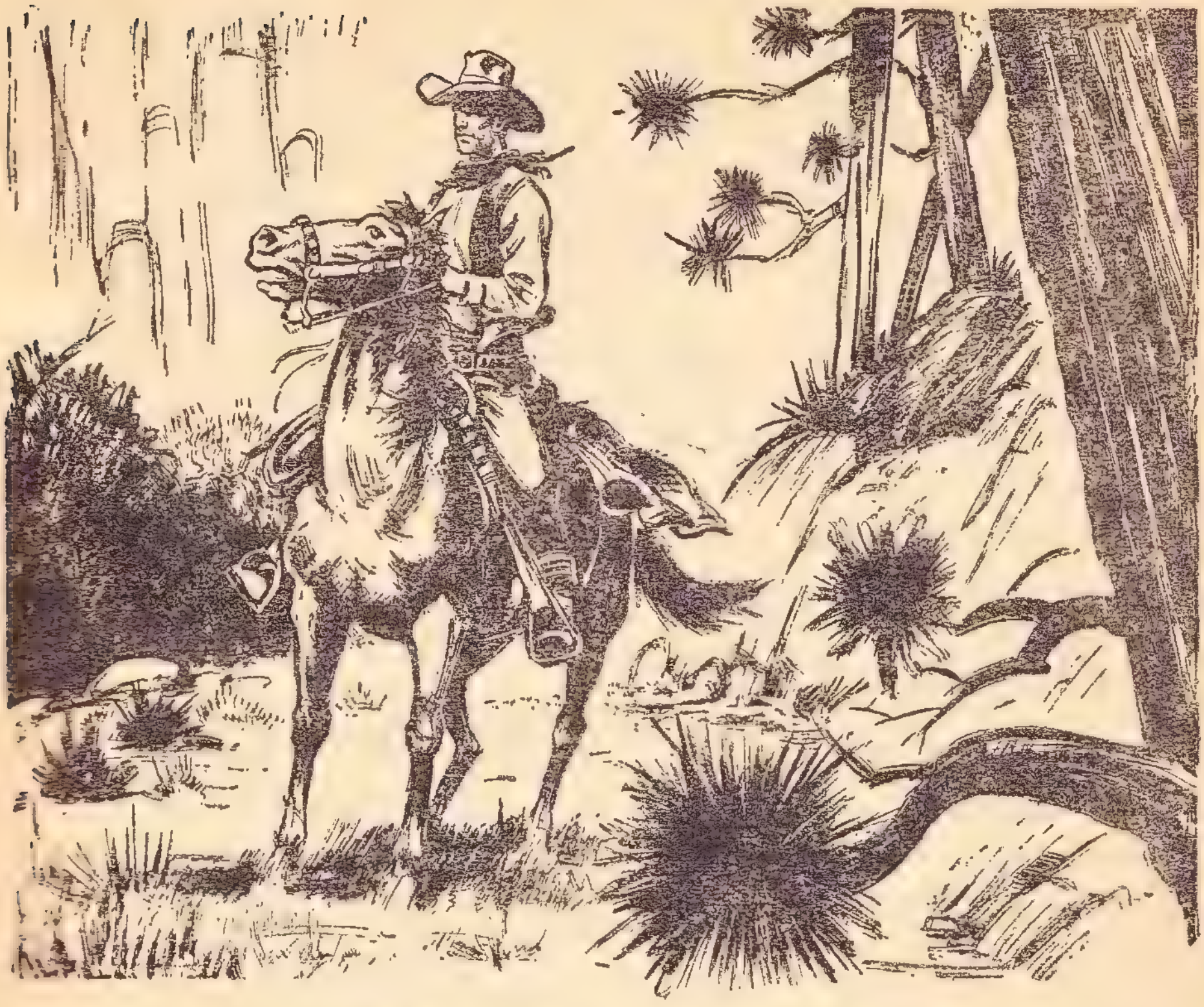
Reluctantly, another inevitable event happened: The church was converted into a temporary jail, with a cordon of Rangers surrounding it.

When the first flush of the migration finally subsided, this annex to the real place of detention was no longer required. But another need arose: The hard-working oil prospectors who had stuck it out and prospered, certainly deserved a little entertainment. So the old church building was called upon once more to fill a different need.

It was transformed into a dance hall and saloon, and enjoyed one of the most sinister reputations in the entire Lone Star State.

★

It was hard to say, and harder still as Jim Shannon realized that he might never see Christy Lemaitre again. But he had to tell her, "I wasn't framed on that gun-running charge; I went to prison guilty."



CACHED RIFLES

by ROYAL W. BOONE

JIM SHANNON returned to Devil Springs a short time after Cochise, chief of the Chiricahuas, made his peace with the white men. He'd been in town two hours—time to stable his mount and get full-treatment at a barber shop—and the Council of Devil Springs was out in force.

Newly founded, this Council and like all things first-born, it more than welcomed the opportunity to exhibit proof of its essence. Six strong, its founders rose to the occasion.

"Shannon," the mayor said, "they should've hung you; that's what we'll do if you stay on here. Cochise is quiet now. We want to keep him that way."

The mayor was a short, round man, his face grave with the dignity of his office. He glanced reassuringly to his aides then measured the long, lean frame of Shannon. The odds bolster-

ing his confidence, the mayor's face darkened with contempt. "You damn gun-runner, ride! By tomorrow night!"

Shannon smiled thinly, his gray eyes surly and cold as arctic gun-barrels. He had the way of telling a man to go to hell without lifting his tongue.

"We'll come looking for you, Shannon," the mayor warned shrilly. "And while we're at it, we'll get Lew Reiter, too; he's been on our books for sometime now."

The corners of Shannon's mouth grew taut, his nostrils flared. "Don't try that, Claid—somebody will get hurt." He let his eyes simmer over the group. "I'll *ride*—when I'm ready. Don't crowd me."

His abrupt departure left a stunned silence.

Jim Shannon felt no deep resentment for Davis Claid, he couldn't chide a man for expressing the general opinion of the Southwest. But the bluntness of the Council left a gall like skin chafed from shaving against the whisker. Grim of face he made his way to the *Palace*, Belden Reiter's combination saloon, gambling hall and restaurant.

LEW REITER was an ox of a man. He raised himself pompously from his chair, right hand extended. A forced chuckle, reserved for such occasions, shook the heavy folds of his face. "Ditch was telling me you were back, Jim, he said ruefully. "I'm glad."

"Don't be," Shannon said, ignoring the proffered hand. He nodded over his shoulder to the street, "I just got my riding orders."

The remark troubled Reiter.

"Claid and his boys," Shannon said.

Reiter chuckled. "Oh, them; tell them to go to hell." He reached further his unattended hand. "I've been waiting for you, Jim; now we'll make up lost time."

"No lost time," Shannon said flatly. "I was to be paid. Remember?"

Reiter glanced to his empty palm, thought a moment before looking up. His dark eyes narrowed; he took another moment then said with gravity, "I remember, Jim. But this other deal?"

Like making sure of its emptiness of other ears, Reiter glanced to all corners of his office, then proposed, "Cochise is at peace, but we can fix that. He'd need guns. We'd clean up, Jim!"

Shannon had been expecting a proposition such as this. With a cache of guns to dispose of, he thought: *why hell, yes!* But he couldn't show any anxiety now, and tried toning his voice to mere casualness. "Where we got the rifles, Reiter?"

"Shannon—" Reiter taunted. "You know better than that. Let's get Cochise on the warpath first."

Shannon cursed under his breath, but promised himself he'd get these guns—if it meant war. Even if it meant losing her—he'd get them.

He answered Reiter icily. "You go to hell; I'm staying on the level."

The face of Lew Reiter flushed red; as if Shannon had slapped him. He had not been prepared for this rebuke and at the second could not control his expression.

Now Shannon found him easy to read: *Jim Shannon wanting to be on the level! Prison couldn't do this to a man.*

And Shannon wanted to answer: *A stretch in the pen sort of slows a man down. Gets him back on track. A year with nothing to do but fight bugs and bust rock gives a man a lot of time to think. Maybe decide it's time to make some good of himself.*

REITER recovered quickly. Shrugging indifference, he dropped his arm and eased his bulk back to his chair. His eyes thinned slits, he glared up at Shannon. "You breaking with me?"

Shannon nodded. "If it's gun-running, I am."

Maybe this wasn't the way, Shannon told himself—this breaking off with Reiter—if he was to recover the rifles.

But this way, he wouldn't run the chance of getting involved again.

Reither raised a thumb to the ceiling, indicating the rooms above. "What about Christine?"

Shannon felt his blood begin to pulse heatedly. Lew Reiter had never approved of his half-sister, Christine Lemaitre, being close to Jim Shannon; now her unattachedness seemed of grave concern to Reiter. Shannon saw her in this as a pawn, a device to bring him in line and he leaned to the desk, his coat open, exposing knife and six-shooter. He sharpened his voice to an cutting edge.

"Money was the deal, Reiter. *Just* money."

Reiter appeared hurt. "I know—I know, Jim—"

He hesitated, feeling carefully for words. "I know I've got to give her up, someday. I don't suppose she can do better, frankly I don't, Jim."

Jim Shannon smiled inwardly. "No deals, Reiter, nothing more than the ten thousand dollars."

For a moment Reiter scowled at a corner of his office. Then impulsively he dug into the inside of his coat and tossed a sheaf of bills close to where Shannon had one hand resting. "Count it," he ordered gruffly.

When Shannon made a move to pocket the cash, Reiter growled, "Now, count it now!"

"I trust you," Shannon said. "You wouldn't short me—now would you? That was a long year."

As he left—not counting the money—Shannon felt the heated silence of Lew Reiter pressing at his back. Outside the door, he saw Ditch Calle playing cards at a distant table. He'd like right now to work on the greediness of this man. But first, he thought he'd better call on Christine Lemaitre; there might be a change of heart here.

Christine, he saw, had been informed of his return. He kissed her lightly on the forehead and through his coat felt the pounding of her heart. When she commented on his sudden return, he explained that he'd been freed after serving the minimum of his sentence. After a long silence, he felt her stiffen, looked down and grimaced at the pain in her eyes.

"Jim," she asked softly, "aren't you going to kiss me? Kiss—kiss me right?"

GENTLY HE pushed her from against him and held her at forearm's length. She was a pretty woman, a heart-shaped face with skin the color of rich cream and satin-smooth. The top of her auburn hair came slightly below the level of his shoulders. This hair she'd recently brushed till its strands, like many polished beads, reflected glisteningly the sunlight filtering through the window at her back. Now she seemed almost fragile, a value easily broken, and his voice sounded harsh and brittle in his ears in answering her question.

"No, Christy, I can't. Not the way I am now."

"But, Jim!" she exclaimed. "Don't feel that way; I know you weren't guilty. Doesn't that mean anything? Can't—"

"Christy!" he cut in desperately. His hold tightened on her shoulders. "I *was* guilty; I ran those guns."

Her mouth dropped. Her face turned a ghastly white and she stared at him through strained eyes.

"No, Jim. No—"

Her voice drowned in her throat and she shook her head in absolute disbelief.

Shannon heard his own breath rushing. "Believe me, Christy; I know what I'm saying."

She seemed to see something on his face and in that second surrendered. Her forehead fell against his chest and she grasped at his shoulders. He tried lifting her chin, but rigidly she refused to yield. His hand moved along the side of her face, below her ear, beneath her hair. Her skin was cold and damp to his touch.

He said whisperingly, "I did everything they claimed." He let her rest a minute. "It began with Tara. You remember Tara? Remember when I went to the Stronghold with him?"

He wasn't sure of her answer, but his own mind turned fleetingly to events beginning with Tara, the Apache youth of seventeen years.

Tara, braved with the spirits of liquor, came to Devil Springs to get a white man. He got instead the blade of Shannon's knife through his shoulder. It was with the help of Christine Lemaitre that he'd dressed the wound of Tara, and it was in Miss Lemaitre's rooms that they'd hidden the wayward Apache for three days, till Shannon readied two horses.

During this trip to the land of Cochise, Shannon promised a sub-chief that he should be able to get him a dozen repeating rifles. The guns were procured, readily enough, by Lew Reiter. Here Reiter found a new source of revenue. Where the Apaches got their gold was immaterial—just so they continued getting it, and in the usual large amounts.

IF CHRISTINE LEMAITRE had any knowledge of this new business of her brother's, and of Jim Shannon's interest in it, she said nothing. And it had become important to Shannon that she didn't know. Christy Lemaitre had put meaning in the life of Jim Shannon and it was for the two of them that he was pinching his dollars. Soon he'd had enough for escape to California.

But a cavalry patrol caught Shannon with a crate of rifles. Shannon was sentenced from one to five years; Lew Reiter was never connected with the case. Wisely—unless he wanted a full-scale investigation—Reiter secretly advised Shannon not to appeal this sentence. Jim Shannon was to be paid well for carrying this load.

Damn! Shannon thought under his breath. *How low can a man get!* He wondered how far he would've gone. Maybe, he thought, it was good that they caught him when they did.

Sensing Christine studying him, he dropped his eyes. Her face was drawn, eyes bloodshot and cheeks flushed. She was still, he saw, on the edge of confusion. "Jim, you couldn't," she said. "Not by yourself."

He gnawed on his lower lip. He'd dreaded this moment, had been unable to prepare a satisfactory explanation. Nodding negatively, he said, "We won't go into that."

She accepted this, proposing quickly, "Jim, let's leave now—forget this ever happened. Go to California as we planned."

His lips drew tight. "No. Not now. There's more guns; I'm after these. Then—maybe."

Her breath rushing, she broke from him. "No more of that! Please, Jim! I couldn't stand it." She dropped tiredly into a chair.

Shannon stepped close to the chair, face twisted. "It's not what you think. There's a couple hundred rifles left. Just think of an Apache outbreak with these guns! Or better—maybe there wouldn't be an outbreak if these guns were burned."

A tremor followed the curve of her lips. "You've got to do this?"

Shannon nodded.

She shuddered, looking away. Her knuckles stood out in sharp relief where she gripped one arm of her chair. Her voice sounded distant, confined. "Please go, Jim."

HE LEFT, thinking perhaps he'd seen the last of Christy Lemaitre. But if this had to be, it had to be, what he had to do was beyond easy reach. A man had to live with himself, had to live with his woman; but how could either live a life worth living with an unfinished past haunting the man.

The day passed without further incident from the Council of Devil Springs and it was late that night that Shannon maneuvered the difficult

Ditch Calle to a darkened corner table. They kept their talk meaningless for a while. Finally Shannon said, "I was through the Dragoons on my way back; seems there were no rifles delivered after I left."

The dark-complexioned Calle remained evasive. "So?"

"Where are they?" Shannon rasped.

Ditch Calle expressed alarm. He extended both white palms, the fingers curled like crow's feet. "I just work here, Shannon."

"You know," Shannon said. He reached to the inside of his coat and under protection of the lapel allowed Calle a glimpse of the currency. "I'll pay ten thousand dollars for those guns, Ditch."

Calle became very nervous. His catlike eyes darted about the activity of the gambling room. "Good gawd, Shannon!" he ejected, breathing hard. "You do want them guns!"

"No strings," Shannon said. "Just show me the rifles." "Wal. I—"

Calle's voice broke. Shannon saw him flinch, saw his shoulders drop as if placed under a heavy load. His eyes had bulged at sight of the far wall, and Shannon glanced in this direction. There stood Reiter, viewing them scowlingly.

"The boss—" Calle gasped.

"Forget Reiter!" Shannon lashed out. "You can hit the high country with ten thousand dollars."

Ditch Calle eased himself from the table, throwing aside Shannon's words like he would stale beer. His lips curled back in a snarl. "Damn you, Shannon! You're gonna get me killed!"

Still cursing, he spun from the table and wove his way through card games to the bar. There Shannon lost sight of him. Lew Reiter, he noted, ambled tc his office, his face still dark and contorted.

Jim Shannon smiled triumph. Give Calle time, he thought, and he would sell. He would sell—providing Lew Reiter didn't guess something amiss, and get to him first.

SHANNON saw Ditch Calle but once the next day and this was distant. He didn't see Belden Reiter at all. During the night he'd decided he must see Christine Lemaitre again, but he'd let this wait another day. He did notice signs of activity down at what was now known as City Hall and he went to see Davis Claid.

"Claid," he said profoundly, "I won't be riding tonight. May be two or three nights yet—maybe a week."

Davis Claid glanced nervously about his office. "We talked you over ome more, Shannon. Decided we shouldn't risk our necks." He gestured resignedly. "We're calling in Nels Ferris."

Shannon thrust out his chin defiantly. "Nels Ferris, huh? I must smell pretty bad—you bringing him in to clean up the stink!"

Claid cowered and Shannon wheeled from the office, an awry smile distorting his face. They'd taken his presence more seriously than he'd ever thought. Ferris!—a gunslick without scruples and who, during the last couple years, had turned crusading marshal. He'd pinned Ferris' ears back once; he'd do it again. And if the Council didn't lay off, he thought bitterly, he'd settle here, yet—just for the hell of it, if for nothing more.

Shannon breakfasted early the following morning at the *Palace*. Finishing his meal, he went to the street to smoke in the cool, crisp air. He'd hardly got seated when a sly, ragged boy stealthily handed him a script of paper then dashed away.

Shannon's first thought was of Christy Lemaitre. He tore into the note, found instead the heavy scrawl of a man.

We are gone to the Stronghold.
You'd better come. Shannon,
I'm afraid. *D. C.*

Exactly what the purpose of Reiter, would be hard to say. But he had some-

thing in mind for disposition of the rifles. This much Shannon was sure.

An hour later, Shannon was back at the *Palace*. He hated waking her this time of morning, but it could be that none of them would return. She had to know something of what could happen. He took the stairs in long strides.

Listening for a moment at her door, he heard movement within. He knocked lightly, wondering at her early rising.

"Christine—"

For seconds all was quiet, then she answered. "Yes?"

"It's Jim, Christy; I've got to see you."

After a dragging moment, she opened the door. He was surprised to find her dressed for the day. He'd expected a robe or some hurried garment. But with her in full-dress, he considered it mannerly enough to enter—and he wanted to confine his voice.

"Christy, I'm going to—"

Breaking off sharply, he sniffed at the air in her room. He knew that smell. His hand stabbed to his hip. Roughly he shoved her behind him and leveled his Colt.

"Christy!" he hissed hushedly; "is that Apache still here?"

BEFORE she could answer, the Chiricahua, Tara, unfolded himself from several gowns hanging on the far wall. As his face, the color of burnished copper, emerged from one garment, he said slowly, "Tara does not want the white woman to speak with split tongue. The tall Shannon would find this someday, maybe; Shannon would be mad, maybe. Tara does not want this."

He paused to smell of himself, indicating he'd seen the cause for his discovery. "Tara has come far. His arms ran like the streams."

Christine had scurried to near the center of the room. Shannon glared at her.

"How'd this happen?"

She spoke softly, with a certain resignedness. "Tara came about thirty minutes ago. He wanted to see you; I told him to wait." She glanced to the impassive Apache. Shannon saw their eyes meet. Turning to Shannon, she said, "That's all."

Shannon holstered his gun, brows raised. He couldn't help seeing the mute instructions she'd given the Chiricahua.

"That's not all," he accused harshly. "What else?" Then after a moment's silence— "Come on!"

She gazed up at him, lips slowly tightening to the color of wet chalk. He saw the tension mounting within her, the spastic contractions pulling at her throat. Then suddenly, almost lungingly, she flung herself at him. Her arms strained at his neck.

She lost control of herself, pleading babbingly, "Jim! Jim, don't have trouble with Belden. Let's go away, now, Jim!"

"Easy, kid," Shannon said. He breathed into her hair, his face a wreath of frowns. It wasn't hard to figure her source of information. Glaringly he lifted his eyes to the Apache. "You talk too much."

Tara met him eye to eye. "Tara has talked much, yes. But only of the truth."

"I urged him," Christine cut in. "Blame me." She swallowed deeply. "Now, Jim—let's start for California. Today!"

SHANNON ignored her, his eyes glued on the Apache. Tara, as was the characteristic of his race, remained as impassive as the blue denim shirt he wore. The folds of a breechcloth hung from beneath the tails of the shirt and around his head was a ribbon of red flannel, the Apache piece of good luck.

Shannon asked him, "What did you want to see me about? You *could* get killed for this."

The Indian gestured disgust. "When the Apache does not want to be seen

he goes on foot. I was not seen. But Tara will not speak of why he came, now; later, maybe. Shannon is mad. Would not understand."

Tara had ended with a finality that said further questioning would be futile. Shannon shrugged. Probably something trivial anyway, he thought. He frowned at the time being lost. At this point Christine cut into his thoughts. "Jim—"

"I can't promise anything," Shannon interrupted coldly, sensing her mind. "You know what I've got to do."

Her eyes widened. She clinched her hands into tiny white fists and her lips parted, showing her tongue, but words didn't come.

Shannon said to Tara, "Stay on here till dark; then get!"

At his back, he heard her call and he closed the door quickly.

He was hard on their trail at noon when he dismounted to seek a cause for the recent stumbling of his mount. Inspecting the hooves, one by one, his heart chilled by degrees.

Lew Reiter had expected exactly what had happened, and had taken precautions. Shannon found all four shoes sufficiently loose soon to make further travel on horseback impossible. The horse would perhaps go another hour then start throwing shoes; and a horse without shoes in this country was like no horse at all. Desert flint would wreck a bare hoof—especially one accustomed to shoes—in a killing short time.

A return trip to Devil Springs for another mount would take too much time. Reiter and Calle had probably packed lightly, and both were known for their disregard of horseflesh. Reiter would see that they pushed the limit. And there had been that urgency in Calle's note, as if he believed this might be his last ride. And Shannon wanted this man alive; he hadn't told enough.

GRIMLY, Shannon started the making of a cigaret. Lapping his tongue across the edge of the tissue paper, he absently glanced into the heated distances to the east. Suddenly his hands stilled, pulses quickening at the thought of this land of the diamondback rattler. The unfinished cigaret slipped from his fingers, spewing tobacco to the wind, but he hardly noticed.

Now only a damn fool, he thought, *would try that.*

But five minutes later, Shannon had his horse unsaddled, the animal left to meander back to Devil Springs. He stowed his gear off the trail in the protection of chaparral. In this cache, too, went his gunbelt and knife. A man crossing that expanse couldn't be hampered with unnecessary weight. He stuck his sixgun in his waistband and worked loose a handful of extra cartridges from the belt.

Travel wasn't as difficult as he'd expected. By keeping to the ridges, refusing the shorter routes of down and over arroyos, he thought he was gaining time. The heat proved his bad enemy. Sweat poured from his face and into his eyes, and at times blurred his vision till a mesquite bush not over fifty feet away would dance about crazily on the sand. High-heeled boots were enough encumbrance in themselves, but the sand soaked up the desert sun as though heat-thirsty and burned at his soles like red-hot spikes. Occasionally he paused to moisten his lips from the canteen slung over one shoulder.

Shadows were beginning to lengthen when he reached his destination, a canyon wall that seemed to extend north and south without end. A horse could never manage descent down this incline. But a man, if careful, should reach the trail below without incident. Because of this barrier, lands to the southeast of Devil Springs were reached by first traveling southwest still gaining a point where the wall leveled, and here swinging back. He descended on the trail below where a small spring bubbled talkingly from a crevice in the canyon wall.

A hurried inspection revealed that no travel had been this way in the past twenty-four hours. Smiling keen satisfaction, he secreted himself behind a boulder, throwing-rope distance from the spring and settled to wait. They'd have to come this way, he reassured himself. This was the first water from Devil Springs.

HE DIDN'T have long to wait. They rounded a bend in the trail, seemingly from this distance riding stirrup to stirrup. Now he wondered about Calle; the note could be a plant, a method to get him into the desert for a lonely death. Fighting an urge to jump them as they passed, he moved with the protection of the rock. He heard them dismounting at the spring and taking on water. Reiter cursed once, and Calle commented on the weather. He'd soon see about Calle.

As he raised from behind the boulder, he took a quick survey of the situation and called out, "Reiter! Calle! Stand put!"

Both froze rigidly. Calle was facing him, saw him and smiled weakly. Shannon took minute note of this, thought Calle seemed greatly relieved. Reiter stood facing away. He turned slowly, head pivoting on hunched shoulders. His eyes met Shannon's. "What do you want?" he asked jerkily.

Shannon thumbed his Colt to full-cock, the metallic sound of hammer engaging sear ringing forcibly in the silent dusk of evening. Lining the barrel on Reiter's chest, he smiled seethingly.

"You're in a damn hurry all of a sudden about them rifles. Now suppose you get in a hurry and tell me where they're at."

Reiter sneered. "You find them, Shannon."

"I'il find them," Shannon hissed through clinched teeth. Methodically he eased down the hammer of his Colt and swung cold eyes on Ditch Calle.

"Ditch! Where are they, Ditch?"

Careful to keep his hands wide of his hips, Calle shrank a step. His lips groped soundlessly. The sound of Shannon's gun coming to on-cock shot his hands to shoulder level.

Shannon said, "The offer still stands, Ditch. You can hit the high country with ten thousand dollars."

Calle gulped at Reiter.

"Clam up!" Reiter snarled; "Shannon's not about to give you anything."

Shannon tightened his lips against his teeth and dropped slightly the level of his Colt. The forty-five slug dug into the sand at Calle's Callon's feet, spraying his legs with stinging flint.

Calle danced like he had brushed against hot branding irons. He reached helplessly to Reiter.

"This—this! Shannon'll kill me!"

"I won't wait, Ditch," Shannon rasped.

Ditch Calle worked his way sidesteppingly away from Lew Reiter and pointed wildly to the southeast. "There, Shannon—there! In the—"

A BULLET screamed off the boulder, spitting rock fragments and dust into the face of Shannon. Half-blinded, he returned the shot, cursing himself for not taking Reiter's gun. He saw his slug take Reiter in the shoulder, spin him around and drop him to one knee. Lew Reiter swayed dizzily for a moment, blinked then dived for his fallen gun.

"Don't, Reiter!" Shannon called. "Don't! I don't want to kill you. Don't!"

His warning fell on mute ears. Reiter scooped up the gun, forefinger curling through the trigger guard. Trusting to luck again, Shannon aimed for the other shoulder. His mind turned fleetingly to Christine Lemaitre, and he thought: *Gawd! This does it!*

Shannon gritted his teeth and was squeezing trigger when suddenly, like some unseen hand had lifted him, Reiter lunged to his feet, arms fraying at the air. A startled expression flooded his face and he staggered forward,

triggering a shot into the ground. He tottered for a long second then pitched full-length, face down in the sand.

His left hand, unconsciously grappling with his hip, naked of gunbelt, Shannon stared in mortification. He felt a cold sweat creeping over his shoulders. The handle of his knife—the knife he'd stowed with his gear hours ago—protruded from the back of Lew Reiter. The missile had come from the wagon-sized boulder behind Reiter. Slowly Shannon lifted his eyes to the silent assailant.

"That does him in," Calle commented. From a corner of his eye, Shannon saw that Celle's hands were unmistakingly wide of his guns. "You can have the rifles now, Shannon."

Shannon ignored Calle, spoke sternly instead to the Chiricahua, "Why'd you do this?"

His face as immobile as the rock on which he rested, Tara said, "It would not be good for Shannon to kill now. His woman watches from the high rims."

"What!" Shannon ejected. "You brought her out here!" His eyes jerked to the rims, raked the ragged edges, but in their hurriedness came away empty. "Across that hell-hole!"

Tara propped his arms akimbo. "That was her command. She got two horses. Ride very fast. Make it hard

This circumstance of little importance to him, Ditch Calle cut in, "I'm glad one of you got Reiter. I was figgering on getting him myself here at the waterhole—before he got me. I think he saw through us, Shannon; what he had in mind, I don't know."

Shannon raised his thumb to the rims, nodded to the Apache. "You get back up there; I'll be up in a minute."

THE CHIRICAHUA moved past him and Shannon thought he noticed a trace of anxiety on the brown face, but he let this pass and turned to Calle. "Where's the rifles?"

Calle fidgetted nervously. "I don't know exactly."

Shannon bit off his breath. "You don't know!"

"Not exactly," Calle gulped. "Somewhere there though." He pointed to the southeast. "I think Cochise knows."

Shannon paled. "Gawd!"

He'd had a short visit with the old chief about a week ago and nothing indicated then that the rifles were in his possession. He hated to think of what this might mean. Mouth twisted, his voice rasped at Calle like a file working on tool-steel.

"Reiter didn't have a deal with Cochise?" He paused emphatically. "Don't lie, Ditch—cause if you do—"

From over his shoulder, Tara interrupted. "The man does not lie."

Shannon turned quickly. The Apache had halted not more than a dozen steps away. Shannon blinked for an explanation.

"There are no guns," Tara said stolidly.

Shannon's eyes narrowed. "Go on."

The Chiricahua wet his lips. "When Cochise made the treaty with the white men it was said that many guns were bad. The great Cochise did not want to break this peace. Shannon was away. The guns were put in a great fire. Cochise needed much time to tell Shannon of this; he send Tara to do this. When Tara tells the white women of these things, she want to ride like the wind."

He looked pleadingly to Shannon. "Now Shannon mad?"

"No," Shannon said flatly, too bewildered to say more. His heart started to sing as he watched Tara tread to the canyon wall. Then he thought of her up there, her seeing all that had happened. Se couldn't be expected to accept lightly the destruction of her brother. A sudden weariness sapping him, he turned to the voice of Ditch Calle.

"Reiter got jumpy after—after you got caught, Shannon. For safekeeping,

the guns were taken to Cochise. He could be trusted if he thought the rifles belonged to you—as Reiter told him."

This sounded logical enough. Humbled, Calle asked for a thousand dollars to get him out of the country. Shannon readily obliged. They piled Reiter's body high with protective rocks; Ditch Calle rode west.

The climb to the top of the rim would be tough in daylight, and now with darkness on he had to be exceedingly careful. He had much time for thought. He supposed so long as there were Apaches, there'd be gun runners. There'd be those trying it anyway. Cochise would bend double to keep the peace; he'd proven that. During a crisis he'd have a hard time though with no one to hear him out but his people. The Council of Devil Springs—all right in its place—would be like so much hogwash here. And Nels Ferris?—he could stand some watching over.

A full moon had all but washed away the darkness when he reached the summit. Dressed in her riding habit, she was seated on an outcropping, the moon full in her face. Tara, Apache fashion, squatted close by.

A lump rose to his throat as she rose stiffly and came to meet him. He breathed relievedly as he felt her hand seeking his. She gripped hard, her skin cold to his touch.

"Christy," he said softly, "I'm sorry. But there—"

"I know, Jim," she interrupted. "Don't say anything more—please." He saw she'd been crying. "I'm glad it's over. Now—"

"Christy," he in turn interrupted, sensing her train of thought. "I'm not going to California; I'm not running. I've got to make good here. I've found friends in the Apache. There's a valley fifty miles southeast of here. If it's the will of Cochise, I'll—we'll start there."

Tara rose suddenly. "The valley Shannon seeks grows green with grass. Streams run with water from the mountains."

Her hands worked absorbedly within his. He caught the damp fragrance of her hair and felt his heart quicken. Cupping her chin in one palm, he looked longingly into her eyes.

After a moment, she said, "Yes, Jim. Yes!"

"Usen and Cochise will be good," Tara said.

That an Apache brave would speak of his god and his chief in the same breath quelled any qualms that possessed Shannon, and he pulled her close.

★

2 *GRIPPING NOVELETS OF MIDNIGHT MYSTERY*

OH, MURDER MINE!
by H. C. Butler

THE HOLE IN THE FRAME
by Hamilton Craigie

lead off the all-star April issue of

FAMOUS DETECTIVE STORIES

ANSWER to the Quiz Story, "Peace With Pride"

The Longhorns did have an attachment to their native soil. This is a definite fact. The stuff about the lady Jack-Whacker is straight stuff.

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★

Someone had spread the word around that Mel Archer was coming to Lariat, and he saw that the same trap that had finished Jeff McLeod was being prepared for him.

VENGEANCE VIGIL

by PETER NORCROSS

AS MAL ARCHER jingled across the porch of the Lariat post office, he realized he was being closely scrutinized by a slit-eyed gent with a mutilated ear, who sat humped in a tilted chair on the veranda of the adjoining building which housed the *Brimstone Bar*. But Archer gave no sign of having noticed and strode on into the post office.

At the sound of his jingling spurs crossing the floor, a girl came to the window marked "General Delivery." The big rider swept his shapeless sombrero from his tousled brown head and took the girl in with frank admiration in his eyes. She had high-piled coppery hair, full red lips with tiny dimples at the corners, soft hazel eyes as clear as a pool beneath a willow, but shadowed, Mal thought, by a vague uneasiness.

He could see she was sizing him up for exactly what he appeared to be—six-feet-two of leathery cowboy, dusty and trail-worn. A lazy smile softened the keenness of his steel-gray eyes, broke the rugged lines of his bronzed face, exposed gleaming white teeth in a wide good-humored mouth.

A warm flush spreading upward from the girl's neck relieved the paleness of her small face. Her eyes too revealed something more than casual

interest. She lifted long silky lashes inquiringly.

"Mal Archer is the name," the lanky stranger said.

If he had said "Judas Iscariot" the girl's expression couldn't have altered more quickly. There was a tightening around her lips and eyes. Her oval face paled again. When she sorted through a bundle of letters and handed one out. Archer caught the trembling of her hand. Then he caught something else—an opening and closing of both eyes while her gaze was not on him, but past his shoulder. He whirled.

Barely did he catch a glimpse of a face at the street window—the slit-eyed face of the man with the mutilated ear. He whirled back. The friendliness was gone now from his gray eyes.

"Why did you signal to that gun-dog who I am?" he asked flatly.

The girl's limpid eyes were panicky. Her face flushed and paled. Then her little pointed chin came up. But when she spoke, her red lips quivered.

"Besides being impudent," she said thinly, "you must be loco!"

SHE REACHED up above the window and released a catch. A wooden blind dropped in front of Mal's nose with a bang. He stood there for a minute listening to the girl's footsteps fading in the rear, then with a twisted grin on his haggard face he cat-footed to the door with his sinewy right hand hovering over the scarred gun-butt on his right thigh.

The slit-eyed man had vanished. Mal knew there was no use searching for him—not now. He swung along the street and shouldered into a Chinese cafe.

Supper time had passed. The cafe was deserted. Mal went back and sat down with his broad back in a corner, facing the door. While he waited, he read his letter.

Don't take a chance on coming openly to the Leaning G, twelve miles due west of town. Ride south four miles. Swing west into Big Coulee and follow that till you pass the mouth of Crazy Man Creek and hit two big sycamores with a boulder between. Then come four miles due north to the spread. Keep your powder dry.

MOSS GOODNIGHT

A fat Chinese with a face like a full moon set down a bowl of soup and pattered back to the Kitchen. Mal read the letter through carefully a second time, then tore it and the envelope into small squares and stirred them into the steaming soup. The Chinese brought the rest of his supper. While he ate he thought, wondered too if he would ever finish that meal.

Mal Archer was a top-hand with the New Mexico Cattlemen's Association. For reasons he never talked about, he hated all outlaws worse than scorpions on his shirt tail.

A week ago a telegram had come to headquarters in Santa Fe from Moss Goodnight urgently requesting a man. The entire Lariat Basin was being rapidly stripped of cattle by a band of thieves nobody could uncover. A secret meeting of the cattlemen had been held and this action decided upon.

Goodnight went on to say that Jeff McLeod, town marshal, had been murdered by the rustlers—shot in the back. That's what made Norcross ask for the best friend Mal ever had. When Mal thought of Little Jeff, as loyal a saddlemate as ever a man rode the river with, cold rage chilled his heart.

Mal Archer was detailed. Moss Goodnight was telegraphed to that effect and instructed to have a letter containing details waiting in the post office.

"And here I am," mused Archer. "But instead of being under cover, I'm most likely hemmed in right now by a

ring of gunslicks. Somebody run a whizzer on me through that Vision of Delight in the post office. And where does she horn in?" He shook his massive head mournfully. "And she seemed so sweet!" Then he got an idea.

Once whoever was behind all this had learned that a man had been sent for, that the man coming was "Mal Archer," and that a letter would be waiting for him, it was only necessary to post a lookout at the post office to watch strangers calling for mail, and get a signal from the girl when the right one blew in. And that information could have been received from but one source—a tip-off on the telegrams.

Big Mal Archer banged a silver dollar on the table and slid to his feet. The Chinese was lighting his lamps. Mal was surprised to see that night had fallen. He stepped out into the darkness, then slid sidewise. Out of the corner of his eye he caught the glint of lamplight on a gun barrel in the black shadow beside the gnarled trunk of a cottonwood tree.

IN SUCH a tight, Mal Archer acted first and thought afterward. The spurt of flame from the tree trunk was a shade behind matching his own. He threw himself sidewise. A slug snarled past his cheek. When no second shot came, he darted for the tree.

A man lay huddled in the dust. Archer rolled him over and slewed him around to get his face in the light. It was the gunslick with the mutilated ear. He had another mutilation now—a gaping hole through his neck.

Men came plunging from doorways all along the dimly lit street. Remembering what he was here for, Archer knew he must make a quick getaway. But the dying dry-gulcher was mumbling. Mal dropped on one knee and put an ear down to his lips.

"He was chain lightnin', Crowley!" mumbled the gunny. Then he died.

Booted feet were thudding on the plank walks. Men were yelling hoarsely. Mal leaped into the narrow opening between the cafe and the store next door, and from there faded into the blackness of an alley. There was no telling if his getaway had been seen.

"Crowley! Crowley!" he kept muttering, then recalled where he had seen that name. It was in black letter on a galvanized sign he had noticed when he rode into town— *Crowley's Brimstone Bar.*

"That don't make sense," he thought as he ran. "There ain't no law in Lariat since Little Jeff was back-shot, and most likely Crowley wants it should stay that way. But if Crowley is the crow behind all this, he knows I ain't no lawman come to clean up his town. But—" he crashed over an ash can, leaped to his feet and ran on—"if Crowley is the boss rustler in these parts, that would make sense."

THE DOPEY little telegraph agent was dozing at his desk when something woke him up with a start—Archer's gun muzzle in the ribs.

"The name is Mal Archer," the big fellow said distinctly. "Before I drill a circle of holes around your belly button, I want to know who you tipped off I was coming."

"I didn't tell nobody!" quavered the cringing agent.

"It ain't good for your soul to lie," advised Archer "not just before going to hell anyhow. I know you told somebody. My question is who? Quick!"

The terrified agent dropped on his knees beside his desk and stuck both hands in the air. "If you promise not to kill me," he blubbered, "I'll talk."

"She's a deal," gritted Mal Archer. "Talk!"

"I stole forty dollars one time," blubbered the agent, "and I got found out. From then on I've had to show every wire, or go to the pen, mister. I'm a sick man; I'd die!"

"Who do you show the wires to?" demanded Mal.

"Tom Padway," pleaded the agent. "It was from his bank I stole the forty dollars."

The tall terror to cattle thieves left the agent groveling on the floor and strode through the darkness to the feed stable where he had left his horse. He was settling his big Brazos saddle on Slumber-heels' strong back when the little stableman came hobbling out of a stall leading a mare that made Archer stop dead.

"I don't wonder, cowboy," chuckled the stableman. "This here's the finest piece of palomino horseflesh in the Basin. She's a queen, and she is rode by a queen."

"I have found considerable knaves in this hell-hole," said Archer, "but nary a queen."

"You would," affirmed the liveryman, "if you looked in the post office. Miss Mary Randall, she owns this mare." He grabbed a comb and brush. "Miss Mary will be in right soon. Workin' daytimes, she mostly does her ridin' at night."

Mal rode out the back door of the stable and out of town by back ways, then struck south as he had been told by Goodnight. His thoughts were jumbled. Too many folks were getting bogged in this pie. He better learn what Moss Goodnight had to say.

Tom Padway might or might not be hooked up with Crowley. Padway got copies of all telegrams. Mal suddenly remembered that he had been grossly careless in one respect—he had failed to see if this letter had been steamed open.

Mary Randall might be the whole show. The gent with the bum ear might have been a henchman of hers, not Crowley's. The words he mumbled while dying could have been in delirium. The telegraph agent could deny he had said a word. Mal realized he hadn't a shred of evidence that wouldn't need the testimony of a dead man.

WHEN HE judged he was nearing Big Coulee he looked back. Perhaps half a mile behind him, silhouetted for a moment on a ridge, a lone rider appeared, then dipped again into darkness. The big rustler hunter flicked Slumberheels with the spurs.

When he reached the mouth of the coulee, he swung the big gelding in and quickly cached him in a clump of red-shank. Then he went back to the mouth of the wash and hid in a rock pile, listening subconsciously to the sad night breeze whispering through the chaparral. At the sound of hoofbeats, his gun slid into his hand.

The lone rider wheeled into the coulee mouth and passed within fifteen feet of Archer's hiding place at a long lope. When Mal saw who it was, he felt a prickly sensation at the roots of his hair. It was a girl in a side-saddle, mounted on a tall palomino. It was too dark to see the girl's face. But the big Association man didn't need to be told who she was.

Quickly getting Slumberheels, Mal let the fleet gelding stretch out till he detected a faint blur in the darkness ahead, then drew in some.

His first thought was to overtake the girl and demand a showdown. Then it struck him that the girl hadn't hesitated at the coulee mouth. She couldn't possibly have seen his tracks. If she was trailing him, it must be because she knew he would go that way. And if she knew that, his letter had been opened.

A new thought came to him. What if old Moss Goodnight himself were in on the deal! He had known such cases —where a renegade masked his identity by posing as the leader of honest men. Then Archer got another surprise.

AFTER ANOTHER mile, the dark blur ahead suddenly vanished. Mal went ahead cautiously. At the

mouth of a shallow draw that bore upward to the southwest, the ring of hoofs on rock stopped him. Far up in that draw he heard the dwindling clatter. Mary Randall wasn't on his trail at all. She had sped away on some mysterious trail of her own.

Again, Mal's first notion was to tail her. But he decided against it. In the first place, he'd probably lose her in the darkness. And he was becoming more and more curious to make talk with Moss Goodnight. With the murder of Little Jeff McLeod gnawing at his heart, he pointed Slumberheels west through the coulee.

The rising moon was filling the big yard on the Leaning G with pale white light when he rode in. He spotted a light in a kitchen window, then quirted off a pack of snapping hounds. A long-bearded oldster threw the door wide and came hobbling toward him.

"You Moss Goodnight?" asked Archer.

"All except one leg," grumbled the old man. "It's second-growth hick'ry, damn it! You're the young whipper-snapper the Association sent, eh?"

"You know a heap of things, ver-dad?" inquired Mal tartly.

"I tell you easy does it," grumbled old Goodnight, "and Grizzly Pocock, my segundo, slopes in from Lariat and tells me you started right in to work the town over by killing Mocho Speer, one of my own crew!"

Mal's mind was working like a trip-hammer. "Who told your segundo," he asked casually, "that the gent who shot Speer was me?"

"Hanged if I know," growled the oldster irritably. He stuck two fingers through his whiskers and gave a shrill whistle.

A lumbering giant of a man lounged from the doorway of a 'dobe bunk-house and came floundering across the gravel. Mal got a good look at his face in the moonlight—the darkly glowering face of a man born in an ill-humor.

"Grizzly," snapped old Goodnight, "who told you Mocho was shot by Mal Archer?"

The giant's feet twisted in the gravel. "I disremember, boss," he said sourly. "Reckn I heard it in the *Brimstone Bar.*"

"Light down, young feller," invited old Moss. "We can talk more comfortable inside. Grizzly will look to your sorrel."

As the surly ramrod turned to lead the horse away, Mal caught the evil light in his reddish eyes.

While Moss Goodnight stomped around rustling up some hot coffee, Archer sized him up in the lamplight, but couldn't make much of him. He was a hawk-visaged old wolf of a man, bony and stooped, with icy buttermilk eyes and a jaw that clamped like a door hinge.

"How come you, Archer," he snapped, glaring through the steam from his coffee, "to gun down one of my boys?"

"I was coming out of the Chink's" Mal explained, "when this coyote you call 'Speer' threw down on me from behind a tree. I didn't miss."

"Hell's hoptoads!" swore old Moss. "One hombre don't throw down on another for no reason whatever."

"That's puzzling me some too," Mal admitted. "Has this struck you, Goodnight: If nobody knowed I was in town, how come anybody to know Speer was gunned by me?"

OLD MOSS' faded blue eyes slitted thoughtfully. "I reckon," he growled, "Mocho probably talked some before he cashed in. But if, like you say, you told nobody who you was, how would Mocho know?"

Archer riveted his steely eyes on the oldster's bearded face. "I told but one person—that was when I asked for my mail."

The old man's white eyelids flut-

[*Turn To Page* 82]

Bass Fishermen will Say I'm Crazy . . .

until they try my method!

But, after an honest trial, if you're at all like the few other men to whom I've told my strange plan, you'll guard it with your last breath.

Don't jump at conclusions. I'm not a manufacturer of any fancy lure. I have no reels or lines to sell. I'm a professional man and make a good living in my profession. But my all-absorbing hobby is fishing. And, quite by accident, I've discovered how to go to waters that everyone else says are fished out and come in with a limit catch of the biggest bass that you ever saw. The savage old bass that got so big, because they were "wise" to every ordinary way of fishing.

This METHOD is NOT spinning, trolling, casting, fly fishing, trot line fishing, set line fishing, hand line fishing, live bait fishing, jugging, netting, trapping, seining, and does not even faintly resemble any of these standard methods of fishing. No live bait or prepared bait is used. You can carry all of the equipment you need in one hand.

The whole method can be learned in twenty minutes—twenty minutes of fascinating reading. All the extra equipment you need, you can buy locally at a cost of less than a dollar. Yet with it, you can come in after an hour or two of the greatest excitement of your life with a stringer full. Not one or two miserable 12 or 14 inch over-sized keepers—but five or six real beauties with real poundage behind them. The kind that don't need a word of explanation of the professional skill of the man who caught them. Absolutely legal, too—in every state.

This amazing method was developed by a little group of professional fishermen. Though they are public guides, they rarely divulge their method to their patrons. They use it only when fishing for their own tables. No man on your waters has ever *seen it, ever heard of it, or ever used it.* And when you have given it the first trial, you will be as close-mouthed as a man who has suddenly discovered a gold mine. Because with this method you can fish within a hundred feet of the best fishermen in the country and pull in ferocious big ones while they come home empty handed. No special skill is required. The method is just as deadly in the hands of a novice as in the hands of an old timer.

My method will be disclosed only to a few men in each area—men who will give me their word of honor not to give the method to anyone else.

Send me your name. Let me tell you how you can try out this deadly method of bringing in the big bass from your "fished out" waters. Let me tell you why I let you try out my unusual method for the whole fishing season without risking a penny of your money. Send your name for details of my money-back trial offer. There is no charge for this information, now or at any other time. Just your name is all I need. But I guarantee that the information I send you will make you a complete skeptic — until once you decide to try my method! And then, your own catches will fill you with disbelief. Send your name, today. This will be fun.

ERIC G. FARE, Libertyville 14, Ill.

ERIC G. FARE, Libertyville 14, Illinois

Dear Mr. Fare: Send me complete information without any charge and without the slightest obligation. Tell me how I can learn your method of catching big bass from "fished out" waters, even when the old timers are reporting "No Luck."

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... Zone ... State .....

tered. "That's out," he growled. "Miss Mary, she is of the salt of the earth. She come West three-four years back to try and get her kid brother off the booze. Ever since then she has not only shifted for herself but for that weak-kneed brother of hers too. Mary, she is plumb loco over that whiskey-guzzlin' pup, hoping eternally to salvage him from the devil."

"The devil," hazarded Archer, "being Crowley?"

"Nope," contradicted the oldster. "Duke Crowley won't sell Laury a drop. But let's get down to cases." He shoved his cup aside and stuffed a load of cut-plug into a charred corncob.

"This whole Lariat Basin is being combed clean of prime cattle by some crew of long-riders we can't even put a finger on," he resumed. "We've had several brushes with the damn wolves, killed two-three vinegaroons nobody recognized—but who in hell the boss lobo is, we don't know."

"It wouldn't be Duke Crowley," inquired Archer lazily, "or Tom Padway, would it?"

Old Moss Goodnight laughed till the tears ran down into his whiskers. "Hell's hoptoads!" he sputtered. "That lard-barrel of a Crowley would skin you out of your eye teeth in a monte game, but Duke's got his hands full acting as self-appointed Mayor of Lariat. As for Padway Tom's meaner'n a cross-eyed scorpion and crookerder'n the hock of a cow, but there ain't enough of him to be a hooter. Besides which, young feller, did I overlook telling you the ramrod of this pack of wolves is a woman!" And at Mal's expression of unbelief he added, "A she woman ridin' a side-saddle!"

Big Mal Archer had heard of such a thing. But, if true in this case, it was the first time he had encountered it. His thoughts flew to Mary Randall as he had first seen her—coppery hair, smiling lips, and soft hazel eyes. Then he saw her as he had seen her last—flying off to the southwest on a racing palomino, and mounted on a side-saddle. He shook his shaggy head like a cornered bear.

"Got any idea?" he asked, "where these hooters hide out?"

"Not any," grumbled old Moss. "There's been a crew of birds with price tags on their hair up in Bullpine Meadows for several years, but them fellers ain't never bothered us down here in the Basin."

"How would a gent get to Bullpine Meadows?" Mal inquired.

"Full of lead," snapped old Moss. "But if you're plumb sot on it, you can go back to them two cottonwoods with the boulder between and on up over the ridge. That will fetch you down into a shallow draw where there's a trail leadin' off to the southwest."

"The trail Mary Randall was riding!" shot through Mal's mind.

"That trail," went on the oldster, "will fetch you fifteen mile up through the hills smack into Bullpine Meadows. But you won't know it—you'll be cold meat."

Mal plucked his hat off the floor and slid wearily to his feet. "I'll take me a gander up thataway," he said.

"You'll find your crowbait in the barn," grumbled old Moss. "I'll rest my hick'ry leg. See you in hell!"

When Mel stepped down from the veranda, he saw that the bunkhouse was dark. But a dim light shone from the open doorway of the barn. He crossed the moonlit yard warily, hand close to gun butt. Just outside the barn door and to one side, he hesitated and peered in through narrowed eyes. The light came from a smoking lantern hanging from a beam by a wire. Mal realized that once he stepped into that doorway, he would be a perfect target, from both inside and out.

But danger or no danger, the rangy outlaw hunter concluded he couldn't stand there all night. Perhaps, after

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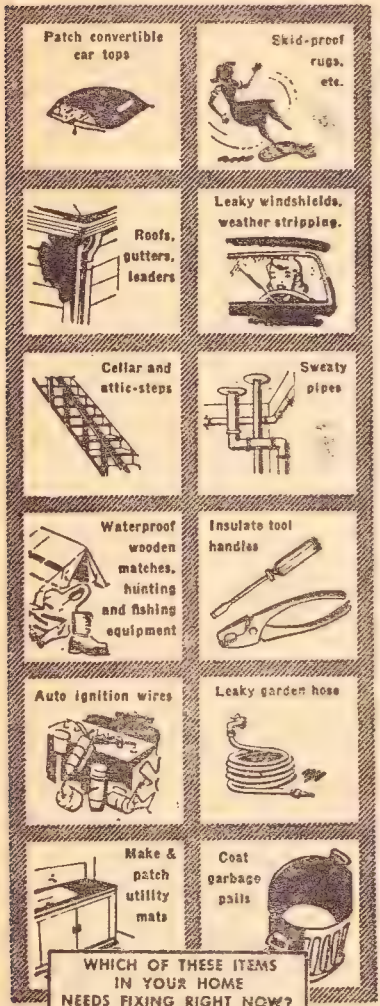

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all, Pocock was on the level. Maybe he had left the light just for convenience, then hit the hay. Mal stepped swiftly through the doorway.

Something that felt like a sledgehammer on a spree crashed against the side of his head. His brain reeled. Fire blazed behind his eyeballs. He fought to get his gun free, but his leaden fingers refused to close on the walnut grips. As he lurched around in falling, his glazing eyes caught a blurred glimpse of the malignant face of the giant Pocock, lying stretched on a beam above the doorway. His hairy hand gripped an axe handle, clubbed for another blow.

Weird figures were spinning in Mal's tortured brain. But out of them all emerged two. One was Little Jeff McLeod. The other—a rounded girlish figure topped by high-piled coppery hair, and with a small, tense face that seemed all hazel eyes. A voice deep within whispered that no matter what the set-up was, little Mary Randall was riding on the brink of hell.

Another thought piled on that one. Mal himself, and he only, could save Mary. Then his lights went out.

He regained his senses in a swirl of pain. He was dimly conscious of a jolting sensation that sent stabs of agony from his head to his toes. Then he found he was lashed crosswise of the saddle on a pony that was straining up a steep mountain trail. The spicy odor of cedar and fir was heavy in his nostrils.

His thoughts flew to Mary Randall, wondering if she was safe. Then he thought once again of Little Jeff McLeod, and the rage of impotence boiled in his veins. He wondered if he himself was to be killed with a slug in the back, as loyal Little Jeff had been. But his thoughts were curbed by the stopping of his horse.

The rope was cut between his hands and feet and he was dumped head-first on hard ground. He rolled over and tried to sit up, but fell from dizziness. From where he lay he saw a blanket

[*Turn To Page* 86]

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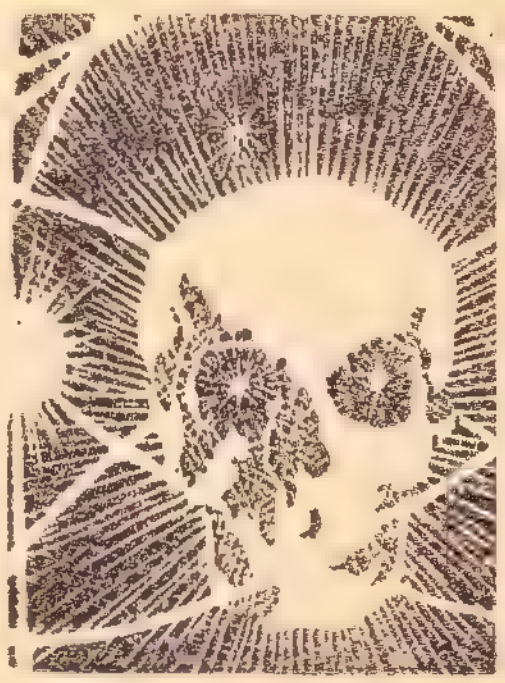

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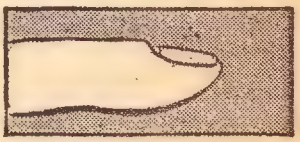

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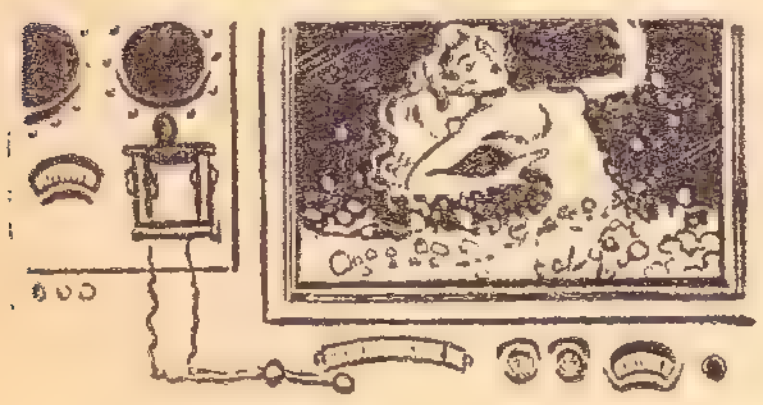

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jerked from the mouth of the cave, letting out a flood of yellow light that played over the surly features of Grizzly Pocock towering nearby.

FOUR MEN came darting from the cave. In a moment Mal found himself lying stretched inside, with everybody gazing down at him. He calmly surveyed the circle.

One of the outlaws was a big buck-toothed renegade with a black patch where his left eye should have been. Another was a gangling beanpole of a man with a fixed crafty leer. Further away stood a sallow youngster with restless hands and bleary booze-reddened eyes. But it was the lader, called by the others "Cuchillo," who caught Archer's attention.

He was an undersized little weasel with merciless agate eyes, as bald as a doorknob. The left corner of his mouth was twisted in a permanent grin. When he spoke, it sounded like the scouring of a skillet with sand. He pointed toward the torn flesh and clotted blood on the side of the prisoner's head and face.

"You mighty near overplayed your hand, Grizzly," he rasped. "I want this polecat kept alive. Soon as we get back from making this raid on old Goodnight's beef tonight, I aim to make this polecat write a letter to Santa Fe telling his boss everything's keno. Once a week he can do that. That way, the cockeyed Association won't be sending a man down here every so often to be gut-shot like I done that chuckle-headed Jeff McLeod."

Mal Archer felt hot blood go surging to his throbbing head. A picture of his murdered saddle-mate flitted across his memory. And there, not ten feet distant, stood the wizened little rat who had planted the slug in Little Jeff's back. Cold rage chilled him. His steely gray eyes stabbed like dagger points at the agate eyes of the grinning little outlaw.

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"You dirty little yellow-bellied bushwhacker," he said distinctly. "You're well named—'Cuchillo'—the knife. I will kill you, if it's the last job I do on earth!"

The devil called "Cuchillo" bared shining yellow teeth in a savage snarl. "You got good guts, lawman," he rasped. "But I been killing your kind so long it ain't even a chore." He swung around.

"Pocock," he sneered. "Did you shove them beeves of Goodnight's over toward Crazy Man Creek, like I said, where they'll be easy to get at?"

"Shore 'nough, bobss," growled Grizzly, "and drifted them this way."

"We got to get a move on," rasped Cuchillo. He motioned to the others. "You there, Randall and Patch, tie that polecat up so he can't wiggle. We got nobody to spare to stay and guard him. I'll be ready in five minutes. You be ready too. Move!"

THE SCRAWNY little leader ducked outside, followed by Pocock and the beanpole.

"So-o-o!" thought Mal. "The young booze-hound is Laury Randall—Mary's kid brother." He noticed the sallow youngster avoided his eyes.

The two made fast the lashings on Mal's ankles and wrists and stretched him out between opposite bunk supports till his long body was as taut as a fiddle string, then hurried out. A few minutes later came the dying rumble of flying hoofs.

In half an hour Archer was free. That was merely routine stuff for him. It had been routine ever since he nearly lost his life by being left tied in blistering Borax Sink.

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[*Turn To Page 90*]

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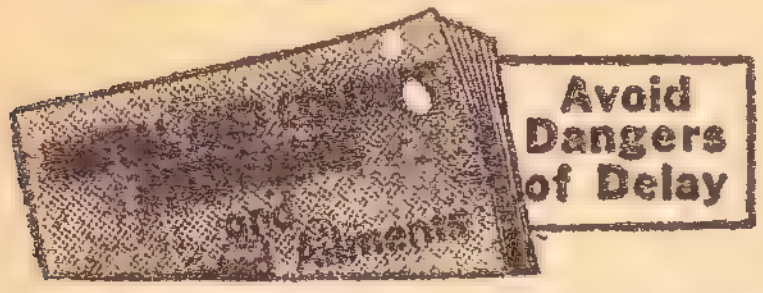

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self by gradually working his feet out of his boots. It was painful, but it worked.

Once his feet were free, he found a sharp edge on a bunk rail and began sawing on his wrist lashings. He was puzzled to find that the hoggin' strings had been tied so loosely they almost fell off.

He took precious time to search the cave, but failed to find a gun of any kind. On the far side of the little meadow in front, he discovered a pole corral holding three mustangs. Expertly fashioning a hackamore from a piece of the rope he had been tied with, he mounted bareback on a stocky bay gelding and shot through the cut leading toward the northeast, where lay Big Coulee and Crazy Man.

He rode like a maniac for Big Coulee, hurling the stout bay recklessly down out of the dark foothills. Two images kept flitting across his mind—the freckled face of Little Jeff McLeod, and the merciless eyes of the devil called "Cuchillo," the fiend who had boasted of having shot Little Jeff in the back.

The idea of riding to the Leaning G for help never even occurred to the racing outlaw hunter. One thought alone boiled in his aching head now—to get his steely fingers on Cuchillo's scrawny throat. He had no gun, not even a saddle. But as he spooked the bay he planned.

He should strike big Coulee just about the time the rustled herd emerged from the dry bed of the Crazy Man. He had a hunch Cuchillo would be bringing up the drag—staying back where trouble would be most likely to occur. And that's exactly the way it was.

Mal was charging down the south slope of Big Coulee when he saw the leaders of a herd of big steers come stringing down the north slope. A human beanpole was riding point.

Mal struck him like an avalanche,

[*Turn To Page 92*]

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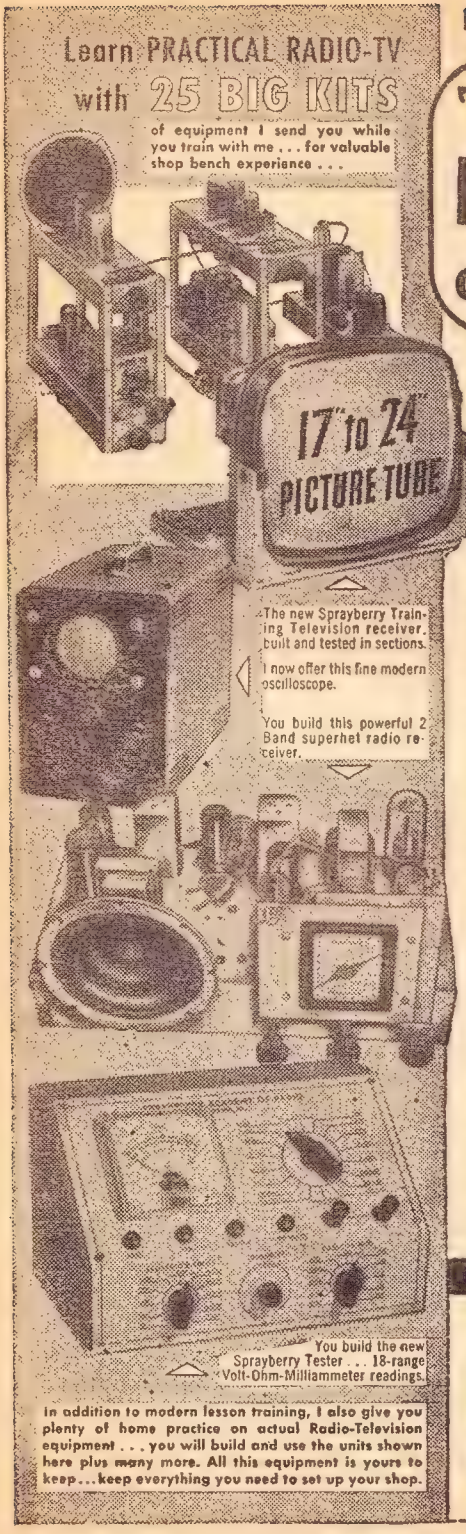
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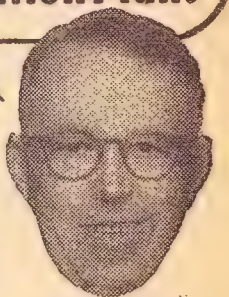

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horse and all. The hooter went sprawling from his saddle, his head striking a dull thump! His sixgun flew from his holster and exploded when it struck. Archer pounced on it and hair-pinned into the saddle of Beanpole's buckskin.

THE TWO riders on the right flank swerved and went spurring up the slope toward a pinon thicket, firing over their shoulders as they rode. The lone rider on the left flank cut straight through the herd and dashed up the slope after them, his carbine crackling. But, to his astonishment, Mal saw clearly by the direction of the carbine flame that the lone rider was firing at his companions! And he knocked them both from their saddles. Then he himself pitched over his horse's head.

Mal whirled. The rider who had been bringing up the drag whipped around the edge of the herd in a dark blur that spat lead. A slug burned past Archer's ribs. Another nicked an ear. His own six-gun roared. The outlaw leader grabbed wildly for the saddle horn, missed it, and parted company with his mount. Never, so long as he lived, would Mal Archer forget the sight of that unhorsed figure hurling through the moonlight, to land with a sickening crunch in a pile of stones. Mal turned his head and covered his eyes with his hand. His throat felt as if someone had shrunk a rawhide band around it.

That hurtling figure was clothed in a woman's riding habit.

Mal couldn't clamp his hand tight enough to shut out the vision that was seething in his brain—a vision of a slim girl with gleaming coppery hair and eyes like still pools beneath motionless willows. The moan that came welling through his clenched teeth helped to cover the pounding of approaching hoofbeats.

Mal jerked his hand away. He was surrounded by breathless riders on horses flecked with foam. He saw old Moss Goodnight drop clumsily from the saddle beside the crumpled figure in

the rockpile, then straighten as though he'd been stung by a yellow-jacket.

"I'll be a hick'ry-legged ol' tumble-bug!" exploded the oldster. "Lookee here!"

Mal was closest, and though his legs felt like rubber he was the first to reach the limp body old Moss had turned face up.

"Cuchillo!" repeated Mal. "Boss

"Who?" snorted old Moss.

"Cuchillo!" repeated Mal. "Boss lobo of the Bullpine Meadows pack of curly wolves."

"Cuchillo—my g r a n d m o t h e r!" snorted old Moss derisively. "That's Tom Padway!"

Mal felt a tiny hand work its way into his. He glanced down. The limpid eyes of Mary Randall were pools of of veiled light.

A goggle-eyed fat man waddled up beside old Moss. "When Mary come to me," he muttered, "and spilled the frijoles, just before she and I rode out to your place tonight, Moss, I just couldn't believe Padway had been pulling the wool over my eyes for twenty years." He stooped and peered down into Padway's bruised face. "That's Tom Padway," he muttered. "But sure as my moniker's 'Duke Crowley' I'll never believe it."

Mary's tiny fingers tightened round one of Mal's. "Padway forced me to point you out, Mal," she said with a catch in her voice, "by threatening to have Laury hung for the murder of Jeff McLeod. Then, after I'd done it, I knew I couldn't do such a thing to you, not even to save Laury from a hang-noose. So I told 'Uncle Crow' and he dusted out to the leaning G to try to head you off."

"Soon as I got wind of all this," cut in old Moss, "I smelled me some skunk close to home and went lookin' for Grizzly Pocock. When I couldn't locate hide nor hair of him, we all started hell-bent for Bullpine Meadows. That's how

[*Turn Page*]

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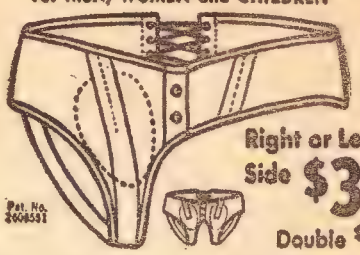

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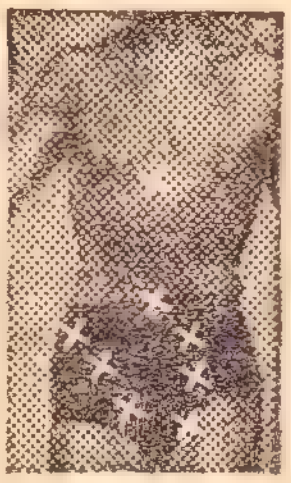

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we come to be crossin' the coulee when the fireworks started."

"Little Jeff McLeod was the best friend I ever had, Mary," Mal said quietly. "Laury didn't kill him. That lump of buzzard bait lying there bushwhacked Little Jeff. He boasted of it."

Mary gave a glad little cry, then instantly sobered. "Mal," she whispered brokenly, "did—did—?"

"You all stand hitched a minute," Mal told them.

He wobbled across the coulee and knelt down in the shadow of a sumach bush. Laury Randall looked up at him with fevered eyes.

"You Mal Archer?" he asked weakly.

"Yes, amigo," Gil said.

"Sis rode out to the hideout this evening," the youngster went on, "trying to get me away and wanting the riding habit and side saddle I stole from her when Padway craved a good disguise and cut off my whiskey money till I kicked in." He choked then went on.

"Sis said you were her man. I laughed that off with my face—but not in my heart. That's how come I tied your wrists so loose. When the shooting started, I figured it must be you, so I done what I was able." His head fell back limply over Mal's arm. "Archer," he whispered. "You be kind to Mary!"

"Depend on that, amigo," Mal Archer told him hoarsely.

Archer climbed the slope and made sure Grizzly Pocock and "Patch" were dead. Then he rejoined the others and laid young Larry Randall's body gently on the ground.

"Mebbyso it's better this way," he muttered. "But if Laury hadn't sided me in this fight tonight, I'd be where he is."

MARY WAS gazing down wide-eyed on her brother. Mal swung on Crowley. "One thing's puzzling me some, Crowley," he said. "Mocho Speer's dying words was— 'He was

[*Turn To Page 96*]

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chain lightnin', Crowley.' How do you account for that?"

Duke Crowley's jowls quivered. "I was forever guying that tramp," he admitted, "telling him that on the draw he was slower'n a cow pulling her foot out of a bog. Reckon it preyed on his mind."

But Mary Randall had had enough. She reeled against big Mal Archer's shoulder. He picked her up, stepped into the saddle, and with Mary cradled gently in his arms headed at a walk for the leaning G.

★

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LOUIS H. SILBERKLEIT
(Signature of publisher)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 14th day of October, 1955.

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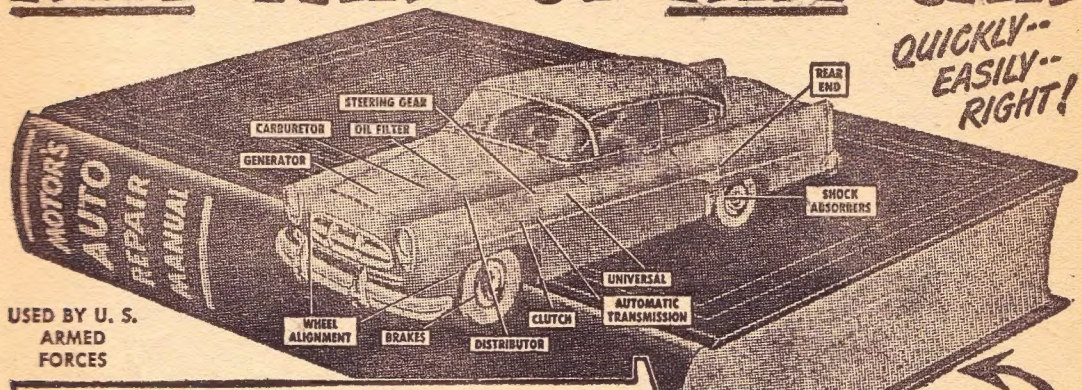

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ANSWERS to the Cattle Country Quiz

If you got all twenty right, pardner, that takes the pot—saddle up and head West, pronto!

1. Peccary, jaguar, wolverine.
2. The Texas longhorns began moving northward in large numbers about the year 1870.
3. His brand. He burned it in the wood of his wagons, traced it on the leather of his saddle and chaps, had it inlaid in gold and silver into the stock of his rifle and sixshooter, and had it printed on the head of his stationery.
4. That is when the cowboys guarded, or held the cattle on the open range, when there were few corrals.
5. Death camas, lupine, loco weed, and larkspur. They sprang up in different places every year. The herder must be able to recognize them a jump ahead of the sheep, and head them in another direction. Death camas and lupine will poison and kill. Loco weed drives sheep crazy. Larkspur is fatal to young lambs.
6. Daniel Freeman was the first person to homestead in the United States, under the Homestead Act of 1862.
7. In the early days of the West, the first-comer was allowed to brand a maverick, if he was the first person to catch it. Many and many a cattleman in the early days got his start, as the oldtimer did, "with nothin' but a brandin' iron."
8. The first telegraph station located in Arizona was at a fort known as "Winsor Castle."
9. He means that he roped the calves—that is, caught them with a loop around their hind legs and dragged them out of the herd to the fires where the branding irons were heating.
10. True.
11. That is the different herds of cattle all thrown together, and going up the trail under one main brand.
12. The cowboy term "ridin' point" means riding abreast of the leaders of the herd. Generally the most experienced cowhand and the segundo rides point, one on each side of the herd.
13. Henry Plummer, an outlaw-sheriff who terrorized the goldfields in the '60's.
14. A kack is a saddle.
15. Cornell University owns it, operating it as an experiment station for testing range-control methods and crop diversification.
16. The Western Trail ranged from central Texas, to Ogallala, Nebraska. The Chisholm Trail ranged from San Antonio, Texas, to Abilene, Kansas.
17. California, Colorado, and Nevada.
18. 1. Dodge, Kansas. 2. Sidney, Nebraska. 3. Cheyenne, Wyoming. 4. Miles City, Montana.
19. His horse.
20. Some rodeo clowns run and jump into a barrel to escape the charge of a Brahma steer on the prod, adding to the comic effect of a very dangerous business when the steer hooks the barrel around with the clown in it.

★